

Country Gender Assessment for LAO PDR

Reducing Vulnerability and
Increasing Opportunity



THE WORLD BANK



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Foreword

Lao PDR's development progress is impressive. In just over 10 years, poverty has been reduced from 46 percent in 1993 to 25 percent in 2010. The lives of thousands of women and men across the country have changed for the better as the country's economic growth and development have continued on a steady pace. In tandem with economic growth, the country has also made impressive gains in promoting gender equality. Human development indicators for women and men alike in both education and health are improving. More women than ever before are participating actively in the labor market, and women's voices are increasingly heard in national decision making.

But at the same time, Lao PDR continues to face challenges in economic and social integration, with rural residents - and ethnic groups and women within these regions - facing greater constraints to inclusion and access to services than those in urban areas. While Lao PDR has greatly improved its performance on household access to water and sanitation and electricity, it is not meeting Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in reproductive health services, maternal mortality, or education. In light of this, the Seventh National Socio-economic Development Plan (NSEDP) has recognized that the effective participation of women, especially poor and ethnic women, is essential for Lao PDR to achieve its goals of poverty reduction and improved living standards.

This 2012 Lao PDR Country Gender Assessment has been prepared by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, in consultation with the Government of Lao PDR, as inputs to their respective country partnership strategies. The assessment presents gender issues into three main dimensions of gender equality – endowments, economic opportunities and agency – and also analyzes gender issues related to emerging areas of development and growing risks.

The main messages of this report *Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR – Reducing Vulnerability and Increasing Opportunity*, are that as the country moves towards realizing its national goals, there remains a crucial role for policies aimed at reducing the most costly gender disparities that are non-responsive to growth and those that have a significant impact on vulnerable groups. On the one hand there is a need to focus on reducing gender disparities and vulnerability in remote rural areas that are home to smaller ethnic groups. These groups are at particular risk of being left behind during this period of rapid economic development. On the other hand, the report also highlights a need to focus on increasing women's ability to take full advantage, on equal terms, of the expansion of new economic opportunities in the market, particularly among women in urban, lowland areas.

Lao PDR is at a critical juncture to harness the power of its economic growth in a way that improves its human development outcomes and ensures that all segments of society can benefit. To achieve these goals, it will be necessary to place gender equality and women's empowerment at the center of national development plans. Promoting gender equality in human development, in economic opportunity and in voice, can improve the well-being and economic prospects of the next generation, and lead to more effective development policy making. The report shows that in Lao PDR, as in other countries, gender equality is both a core development objective in its own right but also the right development policy.

The World Bank and Asian Development Bank are committed to working closely together with the Government of Lao PDR to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. With continued attention to reducing vulnerabilities and improving opportunities, strong progress in gender-equitable growth and poverty reduction can be achieved for all men and women across Lao PDR.

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The findings and interpretations expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, their Executive Directors, or the countries they represent.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
APB	Agriculture Promotion Bank
ANC	Antenatal Care
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CDD	Community-driven Development
CNHDR	Center for Natural Hazard and Disaster Research
COPE	Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise
COMMIT	Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EDC	Education Development Center
EFA	Education for All
EFA-FTI	Education for All–Fast Track Initiative
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ESDF	Education Sector Development Framework
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FHH	Female-headed Household
FOF	Female-owned Firms
GDG	Gender Development Group
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GMS	Greater Mekong Sub-region
GOL	Government of Lao PDR
GRID	Gender Resource Information and Development Center
HDI	Human Development Index
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IDRC	International Development Research Center
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
LAK	Lao Kip
LCCI	Lao Chamber of Commerce and Industry
LDPW	Law on Development and Protection of Women
LECS	Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey
LNTA	Lao National Tourism Administration
LRHS	Lao Reproductive Health Survey
LTP	Land Titling Project
LWU	Lao Women’s Union
LXML	Lang Xang Minerals Ltd
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MRC	Mekong River Commission
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MHH	Male-headed Household
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

MMR	Maternal Mortality Rate
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOH	Ministry of Health
MoNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MOLSW	Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare
MPWT	Ministry of Public Works and Transport
NAPA	National Adaptation Program of Action
NCAW	National Commission for the Advancement of Women
NCCA	National Committee for Control of AIDS
NERI	National Economic Research Institute
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NPA	Non-profit Association
NSAW	National Strategy for the Advancement of Women
NSCCC	National Steering Committee on Climate Change
NSC	National Statistics Center
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRF	Poverty Reduction Fund
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
P2P	Power to Poor Program
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
SPS	Sanitary/Phytosanitary Standards
MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
SIGI	Social Institutions Gender Index
STD	Transmitted Disease
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
Sub-CAW	Sub-Committees for the Advancement of Women
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Fund for Women
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNIAP	United Nations Inter-agency Project on Human Trafficking
UXO	Unexploded Ordinance
VMC	Village Maintenance Committee
VMU	Village Mediation Unit
WB	World Bank
WDI	World Development Indicators
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organization
WSS	Water Supply and Sanitation
WTO	World Trade Organization

Executive Summary

Since the introduction of economic reforms in the mid-1980s, strong growth and development have lifted thousands of poor women and men out of poverty, changing traditional ways of life in Lao PDR.¹ In this environment of change, gender relations — within the family, village and society at large — are changing too.

Gender equality is a core development objective. It is also smart economics. Greater gender equality can enhance productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation, and make institutions more representative. As Lao PDR continues its development, the empowerment of women and girls will be key to translating the country's economic growth and the energies of its young people into improved living standards that benefit women and men alike.

How will gender equity be achieved as Lao PDR's development continues? In this report, two main messages are stressed. On the one hand, there is a need to focus on reducing gender inequality and vulnerability in remote rural areas that are home to smaller ethnic groups. These groups are at particular risk of being left behind during this period of rapid economic development. On the other hand, there is also a need to focus on increasing women's ability to take full advantage, on equal terms, of the expansion of new economic opportunities in the market, particularly among women in urban, lowland areas.

A key challenge for the government is to successfully manage development and poverty reduction efforts in a manner that is inclusive, pro-poor and gender-responsive. With economic change comes social change, in both the family and the community. New risks and emerging issues affect women and men differently, and will need to be addressed with appropriate services and skills that meet the needs of each gender.

This assessment synthesizes information and findings from recent literature and research on gender issues in Lao PDR for the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank's (WB) country partnership strategies. The assessment is planned to contribute not only to the work of the ADB and the WB, but also towards the work of the government and development partners by bringing the latest information on gender issues to the forefront.

Many of the gender issues reviewed in this report cut across multiple aspects of social and economic life. This assessment presents gender issues into three main dimensions of gender equality — **endowments, economic opportunities and agency** — using the framework developed by the World Bank's World Development Report on Gender.² In addition to these three areas, the report also analyzes gender issues related to **emerging areas of development and growing risks**.

ENDOWMENTS

Development challenges are inconsistent throughout the country due to myriad factors that include geographic to socio-cultural and linguistic barriers. Although strong government commitment to achieving gender equity has progressed, persistent imbalances remain in human development endowments such as in health and education. Chapter 1 discusses these imbalances.

HEALTH: Chapter 1 begins with the health sector and demonstrates that, while improvements in antenatal and maternal health care have improved, lingering challenges keep women at risk. Health sector improvements include increased coverage of antenatal care, and an increase in the number of births attended by skilled medical staff. However, women's biological role in reproduction continues to place women at particular risk. This is illustrated by the country's high Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR), which estimates 405 deaths per 100,000 live births. In addition to this, malnutrition rates also remain high and an estimated 37 percent of women of reproductive age suffer from moderate anemia. Moreover, early marriage and pregnancy continue to place young women at risk of health complications.

EDUCATION: Over the past decade, progress has been made to close gender gaps in education. For example, girls' primary enrollment rates have improved, as have adult literacy rates for women. Despite these improvements, fewer girls are enrolled than boys at all levels in school. Primary girls' enrollment improved from 77 percent in 1991 to 88 percent (per 100 boys) in 2009. Similarly, adult literacy has improved from 48 percent for women in 1995 to 70 percent presently, but remains lower than that of men, of whom 85 percent are literate. Nationally,

gender gaps in school enrollment rates have narrowed. With this said, there are still fewer girls than boys enrolled at all levels, and the gap increases at higher education levels. Girls also remain the majority of those who have never attended school. Opportunities for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are limited in general. Although girls constitute 40 percent of TVET students, they are rarely represented in the technical fields such as electronics and mechanics.

WATER AND SANITATION: Both women and men are benefiting from improved access to water and sanitation, but this access varies greatly depending on location, with people in more remote and poorer areas having the least access. However, in places where access is limited, the burden of water collection falls heavily on women and girls. Women are also generally responsible for family health, hygiene and food security, which suffer from limited access to water and sanitation services.

Finally, this Chapter also explores how disabilities relate to gender inequality and the action the government is taking to promote disabled women's equality. The prevalence of disability is just over two percent for both women and men, though there are different causes and types of disability among both groups. For example, men are significantly more vulnerable to unexploded ordnance (UXO) injuries, while women's disabilities are more commonly congenital, or result from disease.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

How will a growing economy ensure equity and inclusion? Chapter 2 questions the benefits and risks of economic opportunities that range from an expanding private sector to the commercialization of agriculture, all realized through year-round access to roads and electricity. Without a doubt, the private sector is creating opportunities for entrepreneurs in Lao PDR, and 30-40 percent of these new entrepreneurs are women. With this said, emerging opportunities and new risks affect women and men differently, and need to be addressed in gender-informed and sensitive ways.

GENDER AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION: Women are active participants in Lao PDR's labor force; however, wage gaps and occupational streaming by gender

persist. Although their work is largely informal, 73 percent of women (compared to 78 percent for men) contribute to the country's labor force, which is among the highest in the region. Women and girls constitute over 70 percent of unpaid family workers, but only 32 percent are identified as 'own account workers'. This suggests that women are less likely engaged in productive work with income that they control. Gender wage gaps are also present. Women in Lao PDR work longer hours than men as they spend 7 hours per day on productive and reproductive tasks, compared to the 5.7 hours spent by men. Women increasingly run their own businesses, but these tend to be smaller than those owned by men. Women also report greater difficulty finding access to finance and technical skills.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: Women's role in agriculture is significant, but often undervalued. Rural areas in Lao PDR are undergoing a period of rapid transformation. Increased agricultural productivity and opportunities for off-farm jobs are helping to pull some households, and select areas, out of poverty. For women in asset-poor households and areas, including those who have lost access to arable land and lack non-farm skills, the commercialization of agriculture can also increase vulnerability. Shifting from subsistence-based to market-oriented household economies can be particularly difficult for women in non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups whose cultural roles, limited Lao language and technical skills, often leave them unprepared to engage with the market. On average, female-headed households have less household labor and productive assets than male-headed households.

INFRASTRUCTURE: Both women and men benefit from improved infrastructure as it enables development and mobility. But rural electrification and rural road access particularly help, contributing to close gender gaps by reducing time women spend on domestic chores. Grid connection increased from 18 percent of households in 1995 to nearly 72 percent in 2010, though women still disproportionately head the remaining poor, unconnected households. Road network improvement is providing better access to services and job opportunities for women and men. But increased road expansion into remote areas also carries new risks for women such as exposure to communicable diseases and human traf-

ficking. Mining and hydropower combined contributed 2.5 percent of the annual 7 percent growth from 2007-10. However, while large gains can be realized at national and local levels, the potential for socio-economic risks such as landlessness, resource loss, food insecurity and a decrease in social capital are persistent threats, with important gender dimensions.

AGENCY

Agency, or women's voice and participation, has steadily advanced in Lao PDR. To begin, women's rights are recognized in the legal system, and women's political representation in the National Assembly has grown nearly 20 percent since 1990. It is now among the highest in the region. However, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, women's increasing representation within central government structures has not filtered down to the provincial and local levels, where significant gender gaps in representation persist, despite that the Lao Women's Union (LWU) is reaching out to women from the national to village levels.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS: The equal rights and participation of women and men in economic, social and political life is supported by the Constitution, various national laws and policies, and international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, there is a need to further level the playing field to promote women's participation and voice in the country's governance structures, by increasing legal awareness and supporting women's increased participation in decision-making at all levels.

GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK: The Lao Women's Union (LWU) is mandated to represent women of all ethnic groups and to "protect women's rights and interests", while the National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) was established in 2003 as the national focal agency for gender mainstreaming in development policies and programs. Between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of female members in the Lao National Assembly increased from 6 percent to 25 percent, and in 2002 a caucus was formed to further advance women. However, women still continue to struggle to participate on equal terms and in equal numbers.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: Systematic reporting of domestic violence is limited, but reported figures are average within the region. Lao PDR has limited support services for gender-based violence. However, there appears to be increasing recognition of women's rights in national legal frameworks.

EMERGING AREAS AND GROWING RISKS

Lao PDR's current growth environment hosts a number of emerging opportunities and threats. Chief among these are the potential challenges associated with regional integration and trade; the question of migration (and its mirror image of trafficking); and growing risks due to climate change.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION: Greater economic links with neighboring countries present a number of opportunities and risks. Trade liberalization and regional integration create opportunities for female-dominated industries, but the broader gender impacts are still inadequately understood. Opportunities exist to strengthen regional cooperation on cross-border issues, including migration, public health and climate change.

MIGRATION AND TRAFFICKING: Both cross-border and domestic migration are a longstanding, highly gendered phenomena. The overwhelming majority of those who go to work in Thailand, for example, are young people from border areas aged 15-25 years old. Women from Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups are disproportionately represented among this statistic. Precise figures are unavailable because the majority of persons migrate through irregular channels. Reports indicate that young women and girls who are trafficked often end up in forced prostitution and domestic labor.

CLIMATE CHANGE: Women's roles in climate mitigation and adaptation have been insufficiently supported to date. With unpredictable floods and drought and the Mekong River bordering the country's western corridor, Lao PDR is very vulnerable to the growing risks of climate change.³ The NSEDP has estimated a 1.1 percent negative impact on GDP from climate change

due to associated risks.⁴ Women’s traditional responsibilities in the household and community as stewards of natural resources position them well to contribute to strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities; however, opportunities to do so have not yet been fully tapped. Women can be supported to switch to clean fuels for household consumption and also maintain their traditional roles in biodiversity protection, particularly in fragile upland areas and in national protected areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lao PDR is at a critical juncture to harness the power of its economic growth to improve its human development and to ensure that society can holistically benefit from its natural resources. To achieve these goals, it will be necessary to place gender equality and women’s empowerment at the center of national development plans. The report argues that there remains an important role for public policies aimed at reducing the most costly gender disparities that are non-responsive to growth and those that have a significant impact on vulnerable groups.

The following table summarizes the recommendations related to the above focus areas of endowments, economic opportunity, agency, emerging areas and overall gender mainstreaming.



Photo by The World Bank

Table 1: Summary of Recommendations

Endowments
Recommendation 1.1: Increase coverage and quality of health services, with a focus on remote areas, particularly in areas of maternal health, sexual and reproductive health, and nutrition, and with attention to demand-side issues and the role of men in maternal health-seeking behavior.
Recommendation 1.2: Improve access to education, through investments in rural schools and educational services, to reduce gender gaps, regional disparities, and gender stereotypes in secondary and tertiary education, vocational training, and adult female literacy.
Recommendation 1.3: Increase access to clean water and sanitation, especially in rural areas, while ensuring women’s voice is reflected in design and maintenance.
Economic Opportunities
Recommendation 2.1: Pursue a labor-intensive growth strategy that expands wage labor opportunities for both women and men, especially in such emerging industries as tourism, garments, and food processing.
Recommendation 2.2: Expand women’s access to and control over inputs for farm and non-farm enterprises, including finance, land, agricultural extension, and business training.
Recommendation 2.3: Improve gender mainstreaming in infrastructure investments, by expanding electricity access for female-headed households, and improving benefit-sharing and female participation in transport, hydropower, and mining operations.
Agency
Recommendation 3.1: Improve capacity and institutional support for gender mainstreaming machinery.
Recommendation 3.2: Support progress in women’s representation in national and local government.
Recommendation 3.3: Reduce incidence of violence against women through legal reform efforts, and efforts to increase public awareness, and capacity of health, law enforcement and protective services.
Emerging Areas
Recommendation 4.1: Through regional fora such as the GMS Working Group on Human Resources Development and the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking, support regional policy dialogue on enhancing women’s human capital base to gain opportunities and minimize risks from regional integration.
Recommendation 4.2: Improve outcomes for vulnerable migrant populations through legal reform, improved services, and strengthened anti-trafficking mechanisms.
Recommendation 4.3: Mainstream gender considerations into climate mitigation, adaptation actions and disaster planning, and ensure that women participate in related consultation and decision-making processes at local, regional and national levels.
Gender Mainstreaming
Recommendation 5.1: Use sex-disaggregated indicators and targets in planning, implementation, and monitoring, and strengthen capacity among GOL agencies in this area.
Recommendation 5.2: Analyze gender trends with a view to interaction with existing rural/urban, regional and ethnic disparities in the country.

Introduction: A Country in Rapid Development

Lao PDR has made impressive progress in economic and social development since the introduction of economic reforms in the mid-1980s. With a population of about 6 million, the country is sparsely populated and landlocked (but increasingly land-linked), rich in natural resources, and hosts an ethnically diverse population.ⁱ Poverty in Lao PDR has declined over the last 15 years, from 46 percent in 1993 to 25 percent in 2010.ⁱⁱ Over the same period, about one-third of the population gained access to improved water and sanitation services, and the proportion of the population with access to electricity rose from 16 percent in 1995 to 71 percent in 2010.

The government is committed to economic growth and poverty reduction. The Government of Lao PDR's (GOL) approach is laid out in its key planning documents: the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES), and the 7th Five-year National Socio-economic Development Plan (NSEDP).ⁱⁱⁱ The 7th NSEDP seeks annual growth of at least 8 percent, and aims to diversify economic activity, scale-up human capital, improve labor productivity, and promote inclusion of women, ethnic groups, and those living in remote areas.⁵ The Plan aims to achieve this through interventions on national economic development, rural develop-

Box 1: Government of Lao PDR Policies on Gender Equality

- **National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES)** – Gender Policy: To improve poor women's economic activities, access to services, and participation in local governance and national planning.
- **7th Five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP)** – Gender Policy: Emphasizes population policy, human capital development and elimination of all forms of violence against women and children.
- **NSEDP Gender Targets:**
 - **Governance:** Aims at 20 percent of government core staff to be female; At least 15 percent of posts above level of district mayor held by women; An increase in percentage of female National Assembly members to more than 30 percent;
 - **Sector Development:** Emphasizes the inclusion of women in sector and area development and planning;
 - **Labor and Social Protection:** Works towards increasing women's participation in paid labor force to 40 percent; Raises awareness on social hazards to 85 percent of women over age 15 on issues such as human trafficking; and
 - **Human Resource Development:** upgrading academic and technical knowledge of women.
- **National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (NSAW)**
Targets include: more than 35 percent increase in number of women in vocational and technical training in each sector; and 30 percent increase in women in political and governance studies; promotion of women's SMEs and economic leadership; increases in women's participation in planning and access to services.

ⁱ The Lao-Tai group represents 67 percent of Lao PDR's population, along with three major non-Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic groups, namely the Mon-Khmer (21 percent), the Hmong-Lu Mien (8 percent) and the Chine-Tibetan (3 percent). These groups further splinter into 49 distinct ethnicities and 200 ethnic subgroups (King and van de Walle 2010). Of the 49 ethnic groups, the Hmong are one of the largest minorities and are most prominent. They include some high-ranking officials, though separatist factions in Hmong areas have also caused the national government to direct more resources to those poor areas in recent years to ameliorate income disparities (US Department of State 2011).

ⁱⁱ The incidence of poverty is the proportion of population falling below the national poverty line (LECS1 1992/3 and LECS4 2007/8).

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) identifies four priority sectors for public investment, namely infrastructure, agro-forestry, education and health. The 7th Five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) centers on the economic and infrastructure sectors (such as industry, mining, energy, and transport), along with social and cultural sectors (including education, health, social welfare and rural development).

ment, livelihood promotion, public administration, and a boost in competitiveness. A longer-term target for Lao PDR is to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2020.^{iv} Gender equality is recognized as an important element of achieving national growth and poverty reduction targets.

A key challenge for the government is to successfully manage development and poverty reduction efforts in a manner that is inclusive, pro-poor, and gender-responsive. With economic change comes social change, in both the family and the community. New risks and emerging issues affect women and men differently, and will need to be addressed with appropriate services and skills that meet the needs of each gender. GOL has developed a National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (2011-2015) that aims to achieve gender equality by improving women's human capital, participation in government, and access to assets and services (See Box 1). This Strategy, coupled with planning on gender equality and women's advancement in the 7th NSEDP, constitute the GOL's strategic approach to advancing gender equality.

Status of Gender Issues

In general, government policies combined with rapid economic modernization have supported the steady advancement of women's status in Lao PDR, particularly in urban areas. Progress has been made towards gender parity in schooling. Almost 25 percent of National Assembly representatives are women — a proportion that compares favorably with those in the People's Republic of China and Viet Nam, and surpasses that in many industrialized countries. Within the National Assembly, a Women's Caucus was formed in late 2002.

Equal participation of women and men in economic, social, and political life is supported by the 1991 Constitution, various national laws and policies, and international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Lao PDR has ratified. To promote gender equality, the government has established a National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW).

The Commission has been improving the collection of statistics disaggregated by sex, and has developed a national gender strategy. The Lao Women's Union, too, plays an important role in promoting women's rights, in its capacity as an official mass-based organization with a strong network at the local level.

Despite progress, there remain large differences in development levels and poverty—as well as gender imbalances—across Lao PDR's different geographic areas and various ethnic groups.⁶ This is a particular challenge given that 42 percent of the country's population lives in mid- and upland areas that are difficult to access for service delivery and are remote from markets.⁷ Economic growth and poverty reduction is concentrated in urban areas and in districts along the border with Thailand, while the Northern part of the country remains poorer, with limited access to transport, markets and social services.

The average poverty rate in rural areas is 38 percent while the urban poverty rate is 20 percent.⁸ Survey data from 2008/9 show that overall poverty has declined from 25 percent to 18 percent, while for the non-Lao-Tai population, it has declined from 50 to 42 percent.⁹ In general, upland areas are significantly poorer than lowland districts, and have worse social indicators. Nationally, one-fifth of non-Lao-Tai individuals live in villages with electricity, compared to 60 percent of Lao-Tai persons.¹⁰ Qualitative research in some of the poorest villages in 2006 suggested that deprivation might have even increased since an earlier assessment in 2000.¹¹

Ethnicity, correlated strongly with location factors, is a major poverty determinant in Lao PDR. Only one in four members of the Lao-Tai majority lives in poverty, compared to nearly one in two non-Lao-Tai (that is, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Lu Mien, and Chine-Tibet group members).¹² In both urban and rural areas, female-headed households (FHH) are generally poorer than male-headed households (MHH) even after controlling education, household composition, and other factors.¹³ Additionally, social and poverty differences based on gender are substantially higher among ethnic communities. For example, boys or girls from other ethnic groups do not share the same progress in school enroll-

^{iv} NSEDP priority areas for rural areas (where 80 percent of the poor reside) include: small-scale infrastructure and service delivery and livelihood development; decreasing the service and income gap between rural and urban areas; ensuring more integrated economic and social development, which includes natural resource management and environmental conservation concerns; encouraging local community participation in development; and improving international and regional cooperation (World Bank 2011g).

ment rates as Lao-Tai girls, hence, the lowest progress in education of any group is found among non-Lao-Tai girls. Taken together, education indicators for non-Lao-Tai rural women remain among the lowest in East Asia.¹⁴

Lao PDR has started to narrow its gender disparities, but lags behind many other countries in this respect. Lao PDR ranked 138 out of 187 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index in 2011.¹⁵ Figures for the 2011 Gender Inequality Index (GII) show Lao PDR ranked 107th among 146 countries.

In 2009 (the latest year available), Lao PDR ranked 38th out of 102 countries for which the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) was calculated. Its value falls in the mid-range for the sub-region. The SIGI for Lao PDR is 0.036, compared with Thailand 0.011; Cambodia 0.022; Viet Nam 0.030; Myanmar 0.046 and People's Republic of China 0.218.^v

Table 2: Gender Inequality Index 2011^{vi}

HDI rank	Gender Inequality Index		Maternal mortality ratio	Adolescent fertility rate	Seats in parliament (% female)	Population with at least secondary education (percentages 25 and older)		Labor force participation rate (%)		Contraceptive prevalence rate, any method (% of married women ages 15–49)	At least one antenatal visit (%)	Births attended by skilled health personnel (%)
	Rank	Value				Female	Male	Female	Male			
	2011	2011	2008	Annual average 2010-2015	2011	2010	2010	2009	2009	2005-2009	2005-2009	2005-2009
East Asia and the Pacific	—	----	79	19.8	20.2	48.1	61.3	64.2	80.3	76.9	90.7	91.9
Medium human development	—	0.475	532	50.1	17.3	41.2	57.7	51.1	80.0	67.7	85.1	78.1
138 Lao PDR	107	0.513	580	39.0	25.0	22.9	36.8	77.7	78.9	38.0	35.0	20.0
Least developed countries	—	0.594	537	106.1	20.3	16.8	27.4	64.4	84.0	28.7	63.7	38.2

Source: UNDP 2011.

^v The SIGI (OECD 2009) draws on twelve indicators, which are grouped into five dimensions: family code (early marriage, polygamy, parental authority, inheritance, etc.); physical integrity; son preference; civil liberties (freedom of movement, freedom of dress); and ownership rights (women's access to credit, land, and other property). The index ranges from 0 (no, or very low inequality) to 1 (high inequality) (See <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/49/39/42296064.pdf> and <http://genderindex.org/>).

^{vi} The GII is a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market. It varies between zero (when women and men fare equally) and one (when men or women fare poorly compared to the other in all dimensions). The health dimension is measured by two indicators: maternal mortality ratio and the adolescent fertility rate. The empowerment dimension is also measured by two indicators: the share of parliamentary seats held by each sex and by secondary and higher education attainment levels. The labor dimension is measured by women's participation in the work force. The GII is designed to reveal the extent to which national human development achievements are eroded by gender inequality, and to provide empirical foundations for policy analysis and advocacy efforts. In this table, the maternal mortality ratio is defined as deaths per 100,000 live births; the adolescent fertility rate is defined as the number of births per 1,000 women ages 15 – 19; data refers to the most recent year available during the period specified; births refer specifically to 'institutional births'; and 'attended births' includes deliveries by cadres of health workers other than doctors, nurses and midwives (UNDP 2011).

Objectives

This report synthesizes information and findings from recent literature and research on gender issues in Lao PDR, to inform the respective country partnership strategies of the Asian Development Bank and World Bank. It also aims to contribute to the work of the government and other development partners by bringing the latest information on gender issues to the forefront. The report reviews and updates the main gender issues that were outlined in the ADB's 2004 Country Gender Assessment and in the 2005 Country Gender Profile prepared by the Lao Women's Union and the Lao Gender Resource Information and Development (GRID) Center, supported by the World Bank. This report is not the product of new primary data collection, but rather draws together existing sources of data and analysis to provide a broad multi-sectoral review.

The lack of consistent and credible sources of data remains a significant challenge across all sectors in Lao PDR; this shortage is intensified for sex-disaggregated data and analysis. With this said, a number of important new issue-centered and sectoral analyses have recently appeared and have been integrated into this report.^{vii}

In Lao PDR, as in most countries, there are consistent (though not exclusive) patterns of gender inequalities, vulnerabilities, and disparities that tend to disadvantage women more than men. These inequalities in turn lead to opportunities missed not only for individual women and girls, but also for the country in unleashing its full potential for economic development and poverty reduction. Much of the analysis in this report there-

fore deals with ways of removing gender inequalities and enhancing women's social, economic, and political participation. It is clear, however, that addressing gender issues will require participation and partnership between women and men to ensure that all people in Lao PDR are able to contribute to the prosperity of their families, communities and nation.

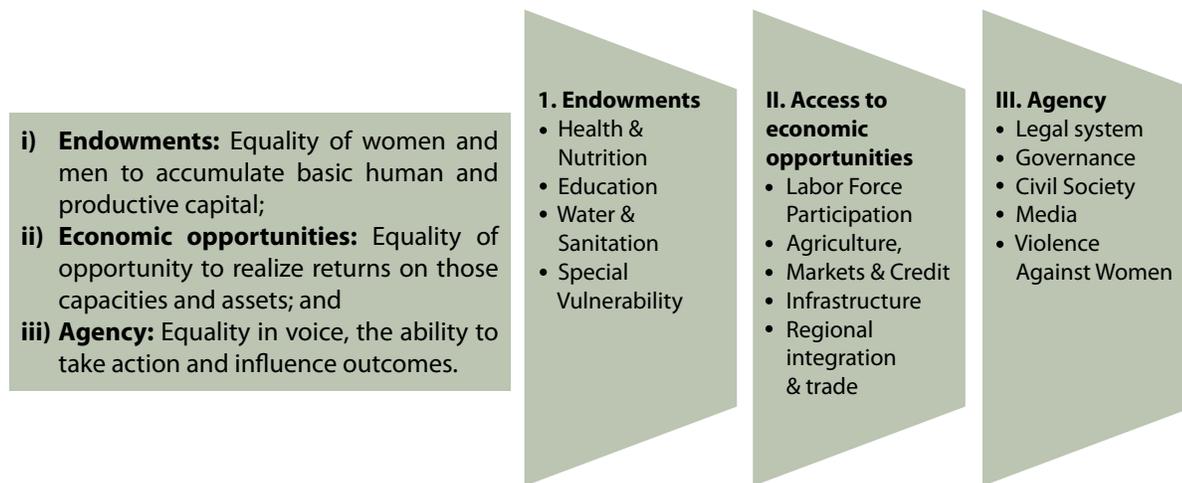
Although many of the gender issues reviewed in this report cut across multiple aspects of social and economic life, for the purpose of this report gender issues are grouped into four main dimensions: endowments (focused on human development and equality in accumulation of basic human capital); economic opportunity (centered around equality of economic opportunities for women and men in the country); agency (examining equality in voice and decision making); and emerging areas (examining regional integration and trade, migration and climate change).

The report is integrating the approach of the World Bank World Development Report 2012 on Gender and Development.¹⁶

The **endowments** section on human development reviews gender dimensions of health, education, water and sanitation and disability, including trends over time, which aim to close gender gaps in these areas. Thanks to strong commitment from the GOL, the trends are mostly positive, particularly in urban lowland areas, and are expected to continue to improve. In human development the main message is that, while a great deal

^{vii} Such as the UNFPA-supported Lao Reproductive Health Survey (2005), the third UNICEF-supported Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS III 2006), the 2nd ADB-supported Participatory Poverty Assessment (Chamberlain 2007 and UNDP, IUCN and MRC 2006), the World Food Programme's (WFP) Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis (2007), the UN-supported MDG Report (2008), GIZ Small and Medium Enterprise Surveys (2005, 2007 and 2009), and the World Bank Enterprise Survey (2009) among others. In particular, the report draws on the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 2007/08 (LECS4)—a nationally representative household survey allowing comparison (based on a partial panel data set) with previous years. The report also draws heavily on the Government of Lao PDR's combined 6th and 7th Periodic Report to the UN's Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (UN Doc. CEDAW/C/Lao/7, 30 May 2008) and the CEDAW Concluding Observations (UN Doc. CEDAW/C/Lao/CO/7, 14 Aug 2009).

Figure 1: World Development Report: Dimensions of Gender Equality



Source: World Bank 2011c.

has been achieved and many gender gaps narrowed, some indicators show slow, or no progress, and certain groups in the population are being left behind. Looking ahead, a key challenge is to continue to narrow gender gaps, particularly in remote areas and across all ethnic groups.

The **economic opportunities** section of the report looks at gender issues in economic development, reviewing gender dimensions of poverty, economic participation, agriculture and rural development, infrastructure, and environment and natural resource management. Lao PDR is experiencing strong economic growth and opportunities. With this in mind, special efforts are needed to ensure that women and men are given equal opportunity to harness these opportunities. Fully utilizing the capacities of women and men, and girls and boys, will be key to translating the country's economic growth and the potential demographic dividend of its young population into development achievements. At the same time, vulnerable populations, such as migrants, need to be protected from the risks of increased cross-border mobility.

The section on **agency** looks particularly at women's voice and participation, including representation within government, access to justice and agency within the household in terms of freedom from violence. Its key message is that the constitution and the legal framework largely guarantee women and men's equal rights, but that there are still challenges in implementing relevant laws and women's participation in decision making forums is still lagging.

Finally, the section of **emerging areas** discusses gender dimensions of potential gains from regional integration and trade; the question of migration (and its mirror image of trafficking); and growing risks from climate change.

The last section of the report **concludes** and **consolidates the recommendations** from the main body of the report into a summary table.



Chapter 1 - Endowments: Promoting gender equality in human capital

Progress has been made towards gender equality in human development, but persistent gaps remain. Gender issues in endowments, or human development, vary significantly across different parts of the country and among different ethnic groups. While Lao PDR continues to make progress on a number of important human development indicators nationally, there remain significant rural-urban and regional inequalities, as well as disparities among ethnic groups. This section reviews the gender dimensions of regional, rural-urban and ethnic divides within Lao PDR with a particular focus on health, education and water and sanitation, as well as special vulnerability linked to disability.

Health and Nutrition

Outcomes have improved but lingering challenges keep women at risk. Lao PDR's health outcomes have improved in a number of areas, including the coverage of antenatal care and births attended by skilled medical staff. However, lingering challenges in the sector continue to place women of reproductive age at particular risk. Death related to pregnancy and childbirth remains the number one cause of death for women of reproductive age in Lao PDR.¹⁷

Lao PDR is "on-track" for meeting the under-five mortality MDG (which calls for two-thirds reduction in under-five mortality from 1990-2015), but "off-track" for meeting the maternal health MDG (which calls for a three-fourths reduction in maternal mortality over

1990-2015). This suggests that there has been progress on child health, but not as much on maternal health in the country.

High fertility rates and maternal mortality rates are combined with poor nutrition and lack of access to basic health services, particularly in remote areas. Lao PDR's high maternal mortality rates make it one of the worst performers in the world on this indicator.¹⁸ Lack of access to family planning and maternal health services, combined with persistence of certain traditional practices, not only endangers the lives and health of women and girls but also has serious negative inter-generational impacts on family health, education and livelihoods.¹⁹

Table 3: Improvements in Selected Health Indicators

	MOH	MOH	UN/ WB
	1990	FY09-10	Est. 2011
Total fertility rate (TFR) per woman (15-49)	7	4	n.a.
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	1200	405	580
Coverage of antenatal care (percentage of total)	21	28.5	30.3
Births attended by skilled birth attendant (percentage of total)	14	37	18.5

Sources: World Bank 2011e and World Bank 2011h.

Access to Health Services

Health service quality and access vary widely, particularly between rural and urban areas. Both Lao-Tai and ethnic groups have traditional practitioners who provide spiritual and herbal treatments (often with accompanying gender stereotypes about health and illness) in most rural and urban communities. Overall, health-care in Lao PDR is a mixed market of public, private, and informal health providers. Access to and quality of services varies greatly depending on location.

Both women and men demonstrate low rates of health-seeking behavior. In 2007/08, 11 percent of women and 10 percent of men reported having experienced temporary health problems within the previous four weeks. Of these, only 10 percent had sought care. Women were reported to be slightly more likely to seek treatment than men. Rural members of Lao-Tai ethnic groups are 10 percent more likely to seek care than populations from non-Lao-Tai ethnicities.²⁰



Photo by insmai.com

In some cases, women face particular gender-based constraints in accessing care, due to mobility limitations based on social norms and heavy domestic duties. In traditional settings, women often rely on their husbands and families in their health-seeking behavior, with male members deciding whether and where women will seek health-care.²¹ Encouragingly, there appear to be no disparities (on average) in rates of immunization between girls and boys.

A household survey in 2010 on MCH in 6 Southern provinces demonstrates that financial factors were the most-reported constraint to health service utilization by women. Forty-five percent of all women reported that “getting money for treatment” was a barrier to obtaining medical advice or treatment. Not wanting to go alone and physical access were additional problems reported. Language and communication concerns were reported by 13 percent of women.²²

Families who lack the savings to cover medical costs use a range of strategies to raise resources for this purpose. These strategies include borrowing through informal networks; reducing consumption; taking children out of school or sending them to work outside the community; and selling assets. Some ration their healthcare, opting for no or only partial treatment of the sick family member, sometimes with dire consequences. It is unclear whether these coping strategies affect girls and boys differently within the family in Lao PDR, though studies from other contexts suggest that household coping strategies often display gender bias.

For non-Lao-speaking ethnic groups, language can be a significant barrier to accessing health services and receiving good care. Cultural divides have proven to be especially challenging when the health worker and the patient population are from different ethnic groups, with different languages, cultures and beliefs. As one nurse in a Xieng Khouang health center said, “*The doctors built me a birthing room here in 2003, but the women still do not come. We do not speak the same language; it’s a barrier. They do not trust me. I am Lao Loum and they are Lao Sung*.”^{viii}

Box 2: Increasing Skilled Birth Attendants for Safer Delivery

Sixty-four year-old Phiel from a village in Luang Prabang Province remembers the day she gave birth, more than 30 years ago. Only her husband attended her birth. They used a bamboo stick to cut the umbilical cord. “*I delivered my babies on a mat on the floor of my house,*” she says. “*We used the grass under the mat on the floor to stop the umbilical cord from bleeding.*” Such practices, though to a lesser extent, still continue in many remote villages.

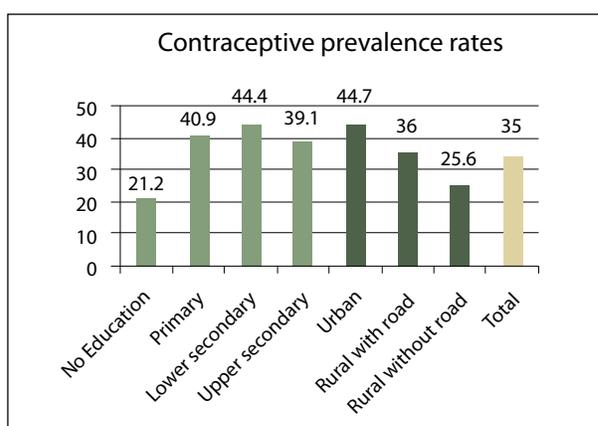
The government is aware of the need to expand the coverage by skilled birth attendants in rural and underserved areas. Studies have shown that Lao women prefer female health care providers, who are in short supply. Government projects like an ADB-supported Health System Development Project is helping address these concerns by training women health practitioners and building clinics in remote areas, predominantly resided by non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups. Female village health volunteers, paramedics and other local health workers who speak ethnic language are also being trained to function as skilled birth attendants.

Source: ADB 2012.

^{viii} Lao Loum means lowlander and is commonly used to refer to Lao-speaking groups predominant in the lowlands. Lao Sung means highlander and is commonly used to refer to non-Lao speaking ethnic groups living in upland areas (MOH and UNFPA 2008).

Access to family planning and contraception are improving, but a significant unmet need remains, especially in rural areas with poor road conditions. Twenty-seven percent of women's needs for contraception are unmet.²³ While contraception prevalence rates are improving, only about 38 percent of Lao PDR's married women report using modern contraceptive methods. Usage rates differ significantly between urban (45 percent), rural on-road (36 percent), and rural off-road (26 percent) areas and between educated and uneducated women.²⁴ Women with no education or only primary education are slightly more likely than women with upper secondary education to report their husband's disapproval as a main reason for not using contraception.²⁵

Figure 2: Contraceptive Prevalence Rates of Currently Married Women, by Characteristics



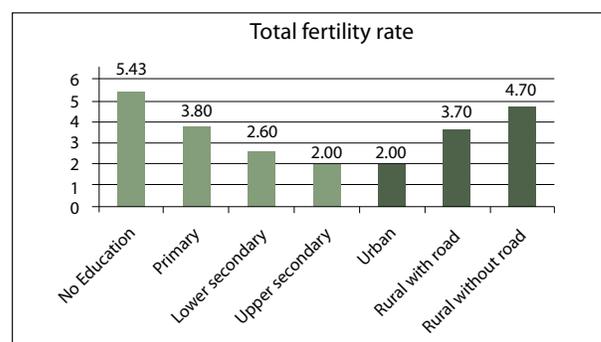
Source: LRHS 2005.

Maternal Health

Women with no education have two and a half times as many live births as women with upper secondary education in Lao PDR. With this said, fertility rates in Lao PDR remain among the highest in the region. The national fertility rate has declined steadily over the past two decades (down from about 7 children per woman in the 1990s). Presently women conceive on average

around 4 children per woman.^{ix} In Lao PDR, as in other countries, fertility is correlated to educational status and location.^x Fertility is highest among rural women living in areas without roads and formal education, and is lowest among urban educated women.

Figure 3: Total Fertility Rate, by Women's Educational Level and Geographical Area, 2005



Source: LRHS 2005.

In 2010, survey work from Southern Lao PDR found that the average age of mothers of children less than two was 26.3 years and the average number of births was 3.3. As expected, the reported birth rate was an increasing function of maternal age: mothers who were 15-19 years of age at the time of survey reported an average of 1.3 births at the time of survey, whereas those who were 45 or older reported an average of 7.1 births. Mothers report an approximately equal number of sons (1.39 on average) and daughters (1.38 on average) currently living at home. More than a quarter (28%) of responding mothers reported giving birth to a child who later died.



Photo by insmai.com

^{ix} This is a nationally representative sample survey. 21,600 households were chosen as respondents, from which eligible women aged 15 to 49 years and men aged 15-59 years, regardless of their marital status, were selected for detailed interviews (LRHS 2005).

^x Increasing migration trends may also change gender norms regarding fertility in the future in Lao PDR. Chen et al (2010) describe a process of social change in People's Republic of China wherein a critical mass of rural returnees led to increased knowledge diffusion and support at community level for greater female autonomy in family planning (even though these changed norms were absorbed more quickly at the individual level by those women with higher education and income).

Table 4: Average Number of Births by Age of Mother

Maternal age	Average # of Births
15-19 years	1.3
20-24 years	2.1
25-29 years	3.3
30-34 years	4.8
35-39 years	6.3
40-44 years	6.3
45+ years	7.1
Mean=26.3 years	Mean=3.3

Source: World Bank 2010j.

The World Health Organization (WHO) global estimates reveal that Lao PDR's maternal mortality rate (MMR) is still among the highest in the world. The National Population Census for 2005 reports that the MMR is 405 per 100,000 live births.²⁶ The World Development Indicators estimated the MMR to be 580 per 100,000 live births in 2008; this is high even when controlling for Lao PDR's relatively low income level. Cambodia, by contrast, had an MMR of 290 and Viet Nam had only 56 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in the same year.²⁷

Table 5: WDI Maternal Mortality Ratio in the East Asia Pacific, 2008

Country	Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births)
Lao PDR	580
Timor-Leste	370
Cambodia	290
Papua New Guinea	250
Indonesia	240
Philippines	94
Viet Nam	56
Thailand	48
People's Republic of China	38

Source: World Bank 2009d.

Encouragingly, the MMR in Lao PDR is declining; however, it is not yet on track to achieve its 2015 MDG target of a MMR of 300. Measuring MMR in Lao PDR is difficult, partly because many maternal deaths occur outside of health facilities and are not registered. There is strong agreement that the MMR is unacceptably high, especially in rural areas, particularly as the majority of maternal deaths are preventable. The high MMR suggests that access to and quality and uptake of emergency obstetric and neonatal care is still a challenge for the country.²⁸

Antenatal care (ANC) coverage for pregnant women remains low in Lao PDR. By 2005, nearly one in three pregnant women received at least one visit from a health provider or visited a health center. Antenatal care is more readily available in urban versus rural areas. In urban areas, 84 percent of women obtain ANC, compared to only 29 percent of women in rural areas with roads, and just 9 percent of rural women in areas without roads. Use of ANC also increases sharply with women's education and wealth.²⁹

High maternal and infant mortality rates reflect slow progress in ensuring the presence of skilled attendants at every birth, and in providing access to basic emergency obstetric and neonatal care. The highest risk of death for mother and child is during birth and the 24 hours after birth. A large majority of mothers still deliver at home, without a skilled birth attendant. A 2005 survey on Reproductive Health found that 76 percent of women aged 15-49 who had delivered at home believed that delivering in a health facility was not necessary.³⁰ A further 34 percent said the distance to the facility was too great; only 6 percent cited cost as a factor.³¹

From 1995-2005, the proportion of births attended by skilled birth attendants rose from 14 percent to 18.5 percent.³² Significant disparities in attendance rates remain between rural and urban areas; and according to education levels, wealth and ethnicity.³³ About 52 percent of mothers in urban areas deliver at a health facility, compared to fewer than 12 percent of women in rural areas. As mentioned, education, wealth and ethnicity are important predictors of skilled attendance at delivery. Skilled personnel assist only 3 percent of the

mothers with no education, compared to 63 percent of mothers with secondary or higher education. Similarly, skilled attendants assist only 3 percent of mothers in the poorest quintile of households, contrasted with 82

percent of those in the richest. Twenty-seven percent of women from households with a Lao-speaking head of household give birth in a health facility, compared to 6 percent of Hmong-speaking households.³⁴

Box 3: Results from Household Survey on Maternal and Child Health in Six Southern Provinces

Results from a household survey on Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition in six Central and Southern provinces of Lao PDR shed new light on the health risks and challenges faced by rural women in these areas. The sample contains data collected in March-April 2010 from 2,741 households across the provinces of Borikhamxay, Khammuane, Savannakhet, Saravane, Champassaak, and Attapeu. The sample spans the catchment area of 38 health centers and includes households from a total of 193 villages in 21 high-priority poor districts.

Half of the women surveyed delivered their child without any assistance. Twenty-five percent of women used a traditional birth attendant (TBA) for delivery assistance. Local resources such as these are more frequently utilized than the formal health sector. Reportedly, only 20 percent of women use formal facilities to deliver.

Table 6: Assistance at Delivery

Assistance at Delivery	(%)
None	51%
Health Staff	20%
Traditional Birth Attendant	25%
Traditional Healer	0.4%
Total	100%

More than 70 percent of women reportedly delivered at home. While national trends suggest that facility-based delivery is increasing in prevalence, it remains relatively rare. More women reported delivering in the forest (198) than in the health center (165), and all facility-based deliveries (including health centers, district and provincial hospitals) accounted for only 13 percent of deliveries (Table 7). Forty-five percent said that their reason for delivering outside of health facilities was for convenience, 20 percent stated tradition as their reason, and 11 percent reported that they lacked required finances. An additional 18 percent of women reported that they did not have time to get to a health facility.ⁱ

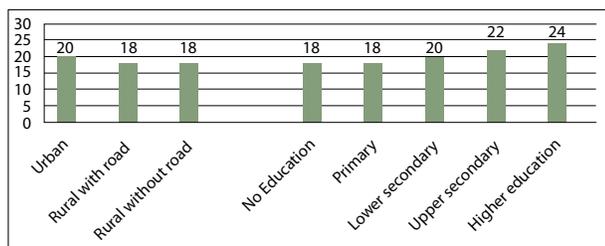
Table 7: Location of Delivery

Place of Delivery	(%)
Home	70%
Birth Structure	5.6%
Forest	7.3%
Health Center	6.1%
District Hospital	6.4%
Provincial Hospital	2.8%
Total	100%

Source: World Bank 2010j.

Rates of teenage pregnancy are high in Lao PDR, but drop sharply with educational attainment. Early pregnancy is an important indicator of women’s health and status within society, as it is closely correlated with educational attainment, lifetime earnings and maternal and child mortality. Early pregnancies often result in increased complications for teenage mothers whose bodies are not sufficiently mature to withstand pregnancy and childbirth. The adolescent fertility rate in Lao PDR is high (47 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19),³⁵ with nearly 17 percent of adolescent girls childbearing between ages 15-19.³⁶ Marriage marks the onset of childbearing and happens at a young age for many women and girls. With this said, rural women marry about two years earlier than urban women. Whereas the legal age for marriage is 18, Lao law permits under-age marriage in “special and necessary cases” (usually teenage pregnancy).³⁷

Figure 4: Median Age at First Marriage among Women Aged 25-45 Years, by Background Characteristics



Source: LRHS 2005.

Adolescents from rural areas have higher fertility rates than other groups. Adolescent fertility drops sharply with progressive levels of educational attainment. One-third of women with no education begin childbearing between the ages of 15-19. This rate drastically drops to 2.4 percent for women with upper secondary education.³⁸

HIV/AIDS and STD Transmission

Lao PDR is the only country in the Greater Mekong Region with a persistently low HIV prevalence among the general population and only 0.5 percent prevalence among vulnerable groups.³⁹ The estimated number of people living with human immunodeficiency virus

(HIV) was 8,000 in 2009. Sixty-two percent of the identified AIDS cases are aged 25-39, during individuals’ peak productive years. HIV transmission occurs mainly through heterosexual sex.⁴⁰ Vulnerable groups in Lao PDR for HIV transmission include sex workers and their clients, migrants and other mobile groups.⁴¹ Data is limited on the men who have sex with men (MSM) group, but some reports suggest higher HIV prevalence among this group. In Vientiane Capital, reportedly 5.6 percent of MSM were HIV positive, contrasted with a study in Luang Prabang that found no disease transmission among this group.⁴²

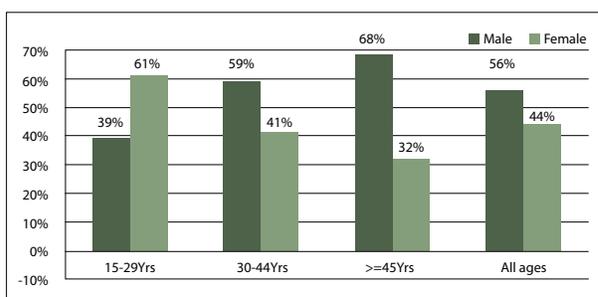
HIV/AIDS awareness is not widespread in Lao PDR. Nationally, only 70 percent of women have heard of the disease, with this number dropping to 46 percent in isolated rural areas.⁴³ Knowledge of the mother-to-child transmission route is very low at just 19 percent nationally.



Photo by insmai.com

In Lao PDR, as in neighboring countries, the face of HIV/AIDS is increasingly young and female. Overall, reported cases are distributed somewhat evenly between males and females (56 and 44 percent respectively). However, among young persons with HIV/AIDS, 61 percent are female, compared to the two older age cohorts where males predominate.⁴⁴

Figure 5: Adults with HIV, by Sex and Age Group (1990-2009)



Source: Center for HIV/AIDS/STDs 2009.

Though young adults are changing their attitudes toward premarital sex, young women still have low negotiating power in this area. A small survey of young urban women in Vientiane Capital indicated that among those who engaged in premarital sex, more than 25 percent had been coerced by their partner, and 23 percent had undergone an abortion.⁴⁵

Increased mobility and changes in lifestyles such as internal and cross-border labor migration, and changes in lifestyles and sexual behavior, heighten the risk of HIV transmission. Concurrent relationships, combined with reportedly low rates of condom usage, put wives and girlfriends at increased risk of STD, including HIV. Paying for sex is more prevalent among certain groups of men, particularly “mobile men with money”⁴⁶, workers such as construction workers and truck drivers, migrant workers, commercial retailers, entertainment industries and the military.^{xi} Sex work in Lao PDR is more informal than in neighboring countries such as Thailand or Cambodia, but there are reports of increasing numbers of sex workers who meet clients on the street or can be contacted by telephone.

^{xi} The Female Sex Workers and Male Electricity Workers Second Generation Surveillance (3rd Round), suggests that up to 50 percent of men in Lao PDR pay for sex on a regular basis (UNGASS, UNAIDS and CHAS 2010).

Box 4: Mitigating Post-construction HIV and STI Risks of Communities along the Northern Economic Corridor

With the assistance of ADB and AusAID, Ministry of Health’s Center for HIV/AIDS/STI in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Works and Transport conducted a range of targeted post-construction HIV and STI awareness and prevention programs in 2009-2011 along the National Route 3 in Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces. A total of 98 peer educators were trained (47 percent female) who made 1,189 contacts (428 female: 761 male) in the workplace (e.g., minivans, truck drivers, coal mines, casinos, road construction, military camps) and 3,851 contacts (1,579 female: 2,272 male) in village settings either through one-on-one or group activities. These peer educators together with the project staff disseminated multiple information, education and communication materials on HIV and STI risks and treatment, and distributed male and female condoms. The end-line survey showed that comprehensive knowledge increased by 44 percent for female youth and 19 percent for male youth and “mobile men with money”.

Source: ADB 2011a.

Though sex workers and their clients report high rates of condom use, many in these groups know too little about the prevention and treatment of STDs and HIV. Sex workers report being frequently stigmatized by health service providers and society in general, leading them to avoid care, to seek care from less skilled providers, or to practice self-treatment.

Malnutrition

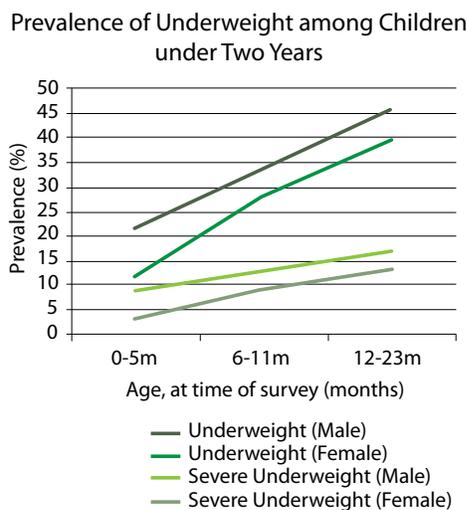
Lao PDR has experienced very high and largely unchanged malnutrition in women and children over the past 15 years. Some 12 percent of women of reproductive age are underweight due to nutritional status.⁴⁷ Additionally, a wide prevalence of chronic anemia contributes to the country’s high rates of maternal morbidity and mortality.

Nationally, almost two in every five children under five years of age are moderately underweight, and 6 percent are wasted.^{xii} In the country’s rural areas, half the children are severely malnourished.⁴⁸ Significantly higher incidences of child malnutrition are found in upland areas, especially among non-Lao Tai ethnic groups.

A household survey in 2010 in Southern Lao PDR found that 31 percent of children under two are moderately underweight while more than one-tenth (11 percent) are severely underweight. The prevalence of stunting is even more extreme: 36 percent of the same population is stunted and 13 percent severely stunted. Wasting is also prevalent as 14.0 percent of the populated is wasted and 2.9 percent severely wasted. These parameters of malnutrition generally worsen with increasing age. For example, the prevalence of stunting increases from 22 percent among children aged 0 – 5 months to 50 percent among children those aged 11–23 months, highlighting the importance of interventions aimed at increasing appropriate complementary feeding patterns.

The study found that there are significant gender differences in malnutrition, with males worse affected than females. For example, the prevalence of underweight is 35 percent among males and 27 percent for females. Likewise, the prevalence of stunting is 40 percent among males and 27 percent among females.

Figure 6: Prevalence of Underweight among Children Under Two Years Old



^{xii} Again, there are discrepancies between official government and donor figures. WFP 2007, cited in Buttenheim et al 2011, reports that half of all children are stunted and one-third are underweight.

Food and feeding practices, particularly during pregnancy and post-partum, are strongly related to culture, traditional beliefs and education in Lao PDR. During pregnancy, women do not necessarily increase or diversify what they eat. They often work continuously until delivery. After delivery, many mothers follow stark food restrictions, for up to one month, and in many cases start heavy work tasks after a few days. Nationally, only 55 percent of new mothers start breastfeeding within one day of their infant’s birth.⁴⁹ Breastfeeding practices have strong cultural determinants in Lao PDR and vary significantly across ethnic groups and regions. The majority Lao-Tai population has significantly lower rates of exclusive breastfeeding (for infants aged 0-5 months) than do other ethno-linguistic groups. Rates of exclusive breastfeeding also decrease with increased wealth (except at the highest income quintile), and are lower in urban areas.⁵⁰

Many women and children are not consuming essential micronutrients. Only 69 percent of respondents in a 2010 household survey reported a diet rich in Vitamin A, and only 55 percent reported consuming foods rich in iron. Furthermore, the study found that 37 percent of women of reproductive age and approximately 40 percent of children under five years old suffer from both moderate anemia and Vitamin A deficiency. Dietary habits were not clearly associated with the ethnicity of the family, although there was a notable trend toward higher dietary diversity with increasing education of the head of the household.⁵¹

Alcohol and Drug Use

While insufficiently documented, increasing evidence suggests that alcohol and drug addiction, especially the use of amphetamines among urban youth, is a growing problem in Lao PDR.⁵² Opium addiction continues to be a problem, particularly in remote mountainous areas where poverty combined with limited access to medical care and pain medication make it the only effective palliative option for some. While men are more prone to alcohol and drug dependence than women, many women, who are often victims of alcohol-related

male violence, cite men's alcohol dependence as a major "family" problem. The number of rehabilitation or treatment centers for alcoholism and drug dependency in Lao PDR is currently limited. There is also growing concern over increasing consumption of alcohol

among young people including female students and girls. Some of these youngsters are observed to be under 18 years of age, and are commonly found at beer gardens, pubs and parties especially in the main cities, provincial and district towns.

Box 5: Maternal and Child Health Prioritized

The Government's health strategy and strategies relating to maternal and child health are detailed in the 7th National Socioeconomic Development Plan (NSED) 2011-15. The 2020 Health Strategy has four basic concepts: (1) full healthcare services coverage and equity; (2) development of early integrated healthcare services; (3) demand-based health services; and (4) self-reliant or financially autonomous health services. It targets the improvement of health management and health financing structures as well as the affordability of services for the poor.

The Government's other undertakings in health include several additional policies. For example, the Primary Healthcare Policy of the Ministry of Health, 2007, directly addresses the MDGs and is supported by reproductive health and nutrition policies. The National Reproductive Health Policy, 2005, provides guidance in achieving the policy goals set out in the National Population and Development Policy and other policy instruments in line with the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy, such as the National Policy on Birth Spacing, 1995; policies on maternal and child health, particularly the Safe Motherhood Policy, 1997; the National Policy and Strategy for Prevention and Care of STDs, 1998; and the National AIDS Policy, 2001. The National HIV/AIDS Strategy and Action Plan 2011-2015 (in line with the 7th NSED) specified a scaling-up of treatment and expanded targeted prevention efforts and support services for vulnerable groups.

To increase service coverage, the Ministry of Health has developed an Essential Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health package and has drafted a Strategy and Planning Framework for the Integrated Package of Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Services 2009-15. With its safe motherhood, child care and birth spacing program, the government seeks to reduce maternal mortality, infant and child mortality by 25 percent, and also raise awareness among men regarding family planning measures. Lao PDR is committed to the Program of Action from the International Convention on Population Development and is a signatory to a number of conventions and other international instruments affecting health policies.

Special Vulnerabilities

Persons with disabilities (PWD) in Lao PDR face multiple barriers to participate in social and economic life. They face widespread discrimination, ignorance and negative cultural stereotypes. Children with disabilities are much less likely to go to school than their able-bodied cohorts, and where they do enroll, they are more likely to drop out earlier. Disabled girls are particularly disadvantaged. Resources to ensure the access of PWD to public services are extremely limited.

While the overall incidence of disability is similar between women and men, particular forms and origins of disability vary significantly by gender, as do the psycho-social and economic impacts of disability. Few data are available on the social and economic situation of Lao women with disabilities, and their status within the family, community, and society. Evidence from other countries suggests that disabled women are often stigmatized and encounter increased levels of physical and sexual abuse, and that their sexual and reproductive health rights are not well recognized.

Table 8: Cause of Disability, by Sex

Cause of disability	Female	%	Male	%	Total	%
Since Birth	9,637	43.7	11,591	33.4	21,228	37.4
War Accident	692	3.1	5,079	14.6	5,771	10.2
Accident	2,334	10.6	6,318	18.2	8,652	15.3
Drug Accident	192	0.9	427	1.2	619	1.1
Disease	7,203	32.7	8,412	24.3	15,615	27.5
Other	1,172	5.3	1,586	4.6	2,758	4.9
No answer	821	3.7	1,263	3.6	2,084	3.7
Total	22,051	100	34,676	100	56,727	100

Source: GOL 2005.

Box 6: Rethinking Disabled Persons' Rights

In January 2008, the government became a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This convention declares that all people with all types of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms and clarifies the ways in which human rights apply to people with disabilities. The GOL has drafted a "Decree on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities", and a *Labor and Social Welfare Master Plan for 2007-2020*, covering:

- i. establishment of a legal framework for the rights and benefit of disabled people;
- ii. ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and
- iii. review of existing laws and regulations from the viewpoint of disabled people.

Education

Gender gaps are narrowing in primary and secondary enrollment, but challenges persist in education completion. While the gaps are narrowing, girls are still

more likely to be left behind, especially in rural areas. Nationally, fewer girls than boys are enrolled, especially above primary levels. The gap is widest in tertiary education, though dramatic progress has been made in recent years. The improvements in the national enrollment ratios of girls largely reflect progress made in urban areas, where economic growth has been concentrated. Gender gaps in education, starting with enrollment, are largest in poor, remote and largely ethnic group districts. In these regions, education quality



Photo by The World Bank

is poor and dropout rates, especially among girls, are consistent.⁵³ These rural urban divides have ranked Lao PDR as one of the lower performers in the East Asia and Pacific region in girls' education.

With regards to the MDGs, Lao PDR is "off track" with MDG targets for Goal 2 on universal primary education, and also for Goal 3 on eliminating gender disparity in all levels of education.

Enrollment

Lao PDR has made progress in education to diminish gender gaps in enrollment rates at the primary level. National primary school enrollment rates have risen steadily in recent years, narrowing gender gaps.^{xiii} Since 2007/08 the gender gap in enrollment rates at the primary and lower secondary level decreased approximately 2 percent. With this said, a dropout trend is on the rise with girls in secondary school.

In primary school enrollments, geographic disparities persist. The rates are lower in the North and South and in rural areas, and consistently lower for girls in all groups, except for urban 6-10 year olds. Rural areas without roads have the lowest access rate: about half of the children there are enrolled in school. Overall, however, girls still make up a larger proportion of the school-aged population (6-20 years) that has never been to school: 17 percent of girls versus 11 percent of boys.⁵⁴

While progress has been made in reducing the gender gap in secondary school enrollments, improvements vary significantly across regions and between rural and urban areas. In urban areas, more girls than boys are attending secondary school, but in rural areas without road access, there are only half as many girls as boys. Gender parity is significantly lower in the North than in the Central and Southern regions. A 2005 World Bank report on schooling and poverty in Lao PDR found that



Photo by insmai.com

in lower secondary school, the average gross enrollment rate masked large socio-gender disparities, from 54 percent of Lao-Tai urban boys enrolled to 7 percent of rural girls enrolled from non-Lao-Tai groups.⁵⁵

In 2009-10, enrollment in primary education for boys and girls was 94 percent; in secondary education 56 percent; and in upper secondary education, 30 percent. In lower secondary school, net enrollment for girls increased from 46 percent to 56 percent; and in upper secondary school for girls from 30.0 percent to 30.4 percent. The lower secondary school enrollment rate still lags behind the boys' rate by 10 percent. But enrollment for boys in upper secondary school has decreased from 40 percent to 37 percent (see Table 12). In summary, the enrollment of girls was lower than boys at all levels of education. Student transfer rates are also significant. Additionally, girls' dropout rates continue to be higher than boys.

The index of gender equity for higher education has improved over time, with 43 percent female enrollment in 2009/10, in contrast to 23 percent female enrollment in 1996/97, when the National University of Lao PDR was established.⁵⁶

^{xiii} The gross enrollment rate refers to enrollment at a given level of education *regardless of age*, expressed as a percentage of the population of the official age group for the given level; the net enrollment rate refers to enrollment of the *official age group for a given level of education*, expressed as a percentage of the population in that age group.

Table 9: Number of Girls per 100 Boys Enrolled, by Education Level

	1991	2002	2006	2009
Primary	77	84	86	88
Lower secondary	66	74	78	80
Upper secondary	56	68	74	78
Tertiary	49	57	62	76

Source: MOE 2009.⁵⁷

Table 10: Gender Gaps in Education

	2005-2006		2009-2010	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Net enrollment in primary school (%)	87	81	94	92
Net enrollment in lower secondary school (%)	57	46	65	56
Net enrollment in upper secondary school (%)	40	30	37	30

Source: MOE 2006 and 2010.

Table 11: Changes in Literacy and Enrollment

	1990	Most recent
Adult literacy rates for women (age 15 years and above)	47.9 (in 1995)	70
Girls primary enrollment (per 100 boys)	77	88
Girls upper secondary enrollment (per 100 boys)	56	78

Source: MOE 2006 and 2010.

Technical and Vocational Education

In tertiary education, both vocational/technical and higher academic, boys outnumber girls in enrollment rates, and the gap increases at higher levels and in more technical fields. Opportunities for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are limited in Lao PDR, with significant regional disparities. In 2005/06 there were 33 technical education institutions and 14 private sector institutions, and only 12 vocational

training schools for lower secondary school graduates. English, business, marketing, finance and accounting, banking, tourism and hospitality, automotive, electronics, engineering and agriculture are amongst the most popular subjects. Opportunities for non-formal training or upgrading of qualifications remain very limited.

Girls constitute 40 percent of TVET students. Though there are more girls than boys in vocational training, girls and young women constitute about 40 percent

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of TVET students overall.⁵⁸ While the gender gap decreased between 2005/06 and 2008/09 in vocational schools (primary level), and in higher diploma/bachelors' degree courses, it increased at the middle technical school level.

Gender distribution varies significantly by qualification type and subject area. At the diploma level (following completion of secondary education), 84 percent of the female students are enrolled in agriculture, business, hospitality and tailoring. Electrical and electronics training, the second most popular subject area, accounts for 28 percent of all trainees, but only 4 percent of courses taken by female students. At the certificate level, almost half the students are in hospitality programs (in which 96 percent of the students are female).⁵⁹ Little is known about the success of girls relative to boys in entering the labor market after graduating from TVET.^{xiv}

Women are underrepresented among TVET teachers. In 2008/09, fewer than 30 percent of TVET teachers were female and there were only 5 women among 43 directors in TVET institutes.⁶⁰ The gender ratio of TVET teachers varies across subject areas, mirroring gender segregation in the labor market and in the student population.^{xv}

Disproportionately few women undertake a higher academic education. Progress has been made in expanding overall enrollment rates in higher academic education. However, gender gaps widen dramatically as the level of education rises. The gender distribution of students also varies significantly across subject areas. Females outnumber males in health, social science, banking, accounting and secretarial work while the reverse is true in engineering, architecture, forestry, natural resources, law and governance studies.



Photo by insmai.com

Table 12: Numbers of Students in Vocational and Higher Education by Sex, 2006 and 2009

Educational level	2005-2006			2008-2009		
	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men
Vocational schools (primary)	3,356	1,041	2,315	187	92	95
Middle technical schools	20,915	9,220	11,695	12,761	4,850	7,911
Higher diploma and Bachelor's degree	48,847	18,776	30,071	111,945	48,168	63,777
Master's degree	-	-	-	387	128	259
PhD degree	-	-	-	92	2	90
Total	73,118	29,037	44,081	125,372	53,240	72,132

Source: MOE 2006 and 2009.

^{xiv} The 2006 National Baseline Tracer Study of TVET graduates analyzed labor market outcomes of TVET, including the proportion of graduates gainfully employed, the proportion of graduates using the skills for which they were trained, the job-search time, and the earnings (MOE and GIZ 2006). Though it collected sex-disaggregated data, it did not undertake sex-disaggregated analysis of male and female graduates (MOE 2007).

^{xv} Women make up 93 percent of all tailoring teachers; 89 percent of hospitality teachers; 46 percent of business teachers; 38 percent of computer and IT teachers; 25 percent of civil engineering teachers; 2 percent of construction teachers; and none of the mechanics, plumbing, or carpentry teachers (HiFAB 2010).

Retention, Progression and Completion

Overall, boys spend more years in school than girls. The higher the level of education, the larger the gaps between boys and girls in enrollment, repetition, dropout and completion rates. Across the education system, gender gaps are larger in poorer districts and rural areas, and among non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups.

Progression from primary to secondary school level is still a challenge for girls, especially in rural areas.^{xvi} On average, about 80 percent of all students who complete primary school continue into lower secondary. About 78 percent of these students are girls, and 82 percent are boys. Rural students often need to travel significant distances in order to continue their education, raising particular safety concerns and other constraints for girls.

Table 13: Years of Schooling Completed, by Sex

	Male age 6+	Female age 6+	Male age 15-19	Female age 15-19
Laos	5.3	4.1	6.7	6.1
Lao-Tai	6.2	5.1	7.5	7.3
Mon-Khmer	3.4	2.0	4.8	3.8
Chine-Tibet	2.0	1.4	3.1	2.5
Hmong-lu-Mien	3.6	1.9	5.7	3.6
Other	4.0	2.8	5.0	3.3

Source: LECS 2009.

Table 14: Percentage of Boys and Girls Passing Primary School Exams

	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Completed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls								
2005-2006	73	73	81	82	86	88	87	93	92	95	82	84
2009-2010	63	60	80	83	85	88	89	90	92	94	77	80

Source: MOE 2006 and 2010.

Table 15: Percentage of Boys and Girls Passing Upper Secondary School Exams

	Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Completed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2005-2006	82	88	89	91	92	96	87	91
2009-2010	85	88	89	91	95	97	89	92

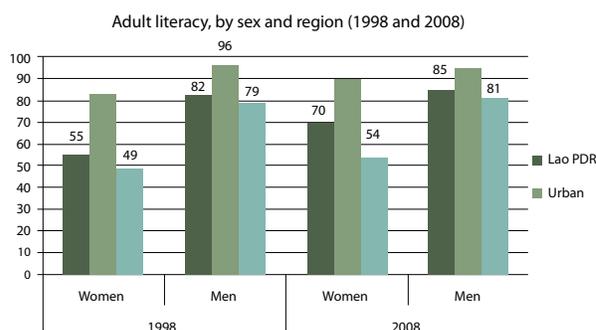
Source: MOE 2006 and 2010.

^{xvi} Primary school includes grades 1-5. In 2010/11 MOE added a year to lower secondary school (increasing it from three to four years) and three years total for upper secondary.

Literacy

Literacy rates for women are also improving. Literacy rates reflect a legacy of gender bias in access to education. The literacy rate for women in Lao PDR significantly improved from 48 percent in 1995 to 70 percent in 2007/08, but remains lower than the rate for men (85 percent).^{xvii}

Figure 7: Adult Literacy, by Sex and Region, 1998 and 2008



Sources: LECS2 1999 and LECS4 2007/08.

Literacy gains among women during the last decade have been more significant in urban than rural areas. Between 1998 and 2008 gender gaps in literacy rates in urban areas fell substantially, from 14 percent to 5 percent, while in rural areas, it decreased only slightly - from 30 percent to 27 percent.^{xviii}

Youth literacy is also improving, but young women still report lower literacy rates than young men. Among young people aged 15-24, self-reported literacy rates are on the rise, but remain significantly lower for young women (79 percent) than for young men (89 percent).⁶¹ These figures should be interpreted with caution since tested rates for functional literacy are only just over half the self-reported rates. Literacy among young people is significantly higher in urban than in rural areas, and significantly higher for those in the Tai-Kadai linguistic groups than for others.⁶²



Photo by The World Bank

Infrastructure and Safety

Infrequent school attendance of poor girls from rural areas, especially at higher-grade levels, has persisted since 2000.⁶³ Reasons for low school attendance include girls' household responsibilities, including caring for younger siblings, and farm work. Financial constraints also impede girls' schooling, such as the cost of clothing and school supplies, as well as the opportunity cost of girls' lost labor. Physical factors are important, including the distance to the nearest school; road access to the school; and the presence of separate latrines for girls and boys.

Within the educational experience itself, the language of instruction matters. Lao language is a barrier to education for many non-Lao Tai girls; poor relevance of school curriculum to students' lives; rigid school sched-

^{xvii} Literacy numbers and rates in Lao PDR should be treated with caution as they constitute subjective assessments of LECS household survey responses regarding the Lao language reading and writing skills of household members. The numbers here combine categories of persons aged 15+ who can read and write "without difficulty" or "with some difficulty."

ules; poor quality of instruction; the limited number of teachers from non-Lao-Tai groups; and inadequate school facilities.

Finally, socio-cultural factors also affect girls' participation in education. Such factors include: level of parental support; lack of awareness of opportunities arising from education (especially among ethnic groups); parents' education levels; and cultural traditions (including early marriage for girls, especially among non-Lao-Tai groups). There also remains a lack of female role models in education, both as peers, mentors and examples of what girls can do with an education.

Lack of facilities, access and malnutrition negatively affect educational outcomes. Lack of locally available school facilities presents a barrier for girls to complete the full five grades of primary school. Girls are less likely than boys to walk long distances to study at a complete school, or to attend as boarders due to safety factors.⁶⁴ About 15 percent of Lao villages still have no primary school within commuting distance. These gaps hit non-Lao-Tai villages particularly hard. It was reported in 2002-03 that 34 percent of rural non-Lao-Tai girls had never attended school (compared to just 6 percent of Lao-Tai girls).⁶⁵ Approximately 70 percent of the prima-

ry schools in the poorest districts are incomplete, only offering classes up to second or third grade.⁶⁶ More than 4,500 primary schools—about half of the country's total—consist of only one or two classrooms.

Safety concerns hinders girls' enrollment. Many school environments are not yet inclusive, or safe enough to sustain girls' participation. For example, many lack separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls. In addition to this, some studies report incidents of verbal, psychological and sexual harassment.⁶⁷ A study of informal barriers found that the conditions in school dormitories vary dramatically according to location, sometimes without separate accommodation for girls. Kitchen facilities are generally separate temporary structures built by the parents of the boarders where children cook in small groups, often with only one pot. Inadequate access to water and sanitation, electricity for studying, and warm clothes and blankets was often reported. Lack of formal supervision creates particular vulnerabilities for both girls and boys to sexual harassment and assault. Finally, gender gaps among teachers are narrowing at the primary and secondary levels, but men still predominate as teachers at higher educational levels. This may negatively affect girls' motivation to learn.

Box 7: Programs Aims to Strengthen Education Effectiveness

The GOL's 2009 *Education Sector Development Framework* (ESDF) covers all education levels. Through this framework, the introduction of a multi-grade teaching approach has strengthened the effectiveness of education service delivery. Improved services include recruiting and deploying ethnic teachers in remote and isolated areas; improving the quality of teaching and teaching materials; and ensuring safe school environments that are sensitive to gender and ethnic-group differences, and to the needs of children with disabilities. The 2010 *Education for All-Fast Track Initiative* (EFA-FTI) supports increased coverage by providing classrooms for pre-primary and primary schooling in villages in the country's 56 most educationally disadvantaged districts, as identified by lower-than-national-average enrollment and completion rates for girls.

To strengthen their focus on reaching disadvantaged groups, especially ethnic girls and women in rural areas, MOE has drafted an Inclusive Education Policy, based on ESDF targets, to ensure that the rights of all to a quality education can be fulfilled, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, economic, or other status. Inclusive education is central to the "Schools of Quality" approach that MOE is implementing with the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) support. This approach has achieved impressive results with school enrollment rates for girls.⁶⁸ It focuses on inclusivity, gender responsiveness, and community mobilization; and

^{xviii} The gender gap in literacy rate is calculated as the difference between the percentage of women who are literate and the percentage of men who are literate (LECS4 2007/08).

integrates inputs from the health, nutrition, water supply, sanitation and hygiene, and child protection sectors in order to provide a healthy, safe and protective environment that attracts more girls to school.

In technical and vocational education and training, a recently approved Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project⁶⁹ includes a 20% quota for female trainees in nontraditional priority skill areas (construction, furniture making and automotive and mechanical repair); construction of dormitories; training vouchers for students from poor households; six-month wage subsidy to employers to hire girls as trainees; and social marketing campaigns to change the gender stereotypes in the labor market.

Sources: ADB 2011a and 2011i; and World Bank 2010.

Water and Sanitation

Clean water and sanitation are basic public services and are also fundamental for improving health and educational outcomes, especially for women and girls. Though Lao PDR has made significant progress in this sector, challenges remain in meeting the MDG target on water and sanitation, which is to “halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation”. From 1995-2008, the proportion of the Lao PDR population using improved drinking water sources increased from 44 percent to 67 percent, while the proportion using an improved sanitation facility increased from 18 percent to 63 percent.⁷⁰ This contrasts with MDG targets for improved sanitation access in Lao PDR, which stand at 70 percent of the population.

Significant Rural-urban Inequalities

People in more remote and poorer areas have the least access to safe water and sanitation. For example, only 23 percent of the households in rural areas without roads have access to safe water (piped or from a protected well-water source), compared to 88 percent of urban households.⁷¹ And rates of access for poor households are about 10-15 percent below those for non-poor households.⁷² In the area of sanitation, 38 percent of the population has access to improved sanitation facilities, while 87 percent has access in urban areas.⁷³

The burden of limited access to water and sanitation often falls heavily on women and girls. Where access is limited, the burden of water collection from secondary sources falls on women and girls. This is a heavy physical burden on the young, elderly, and sick, and reduces

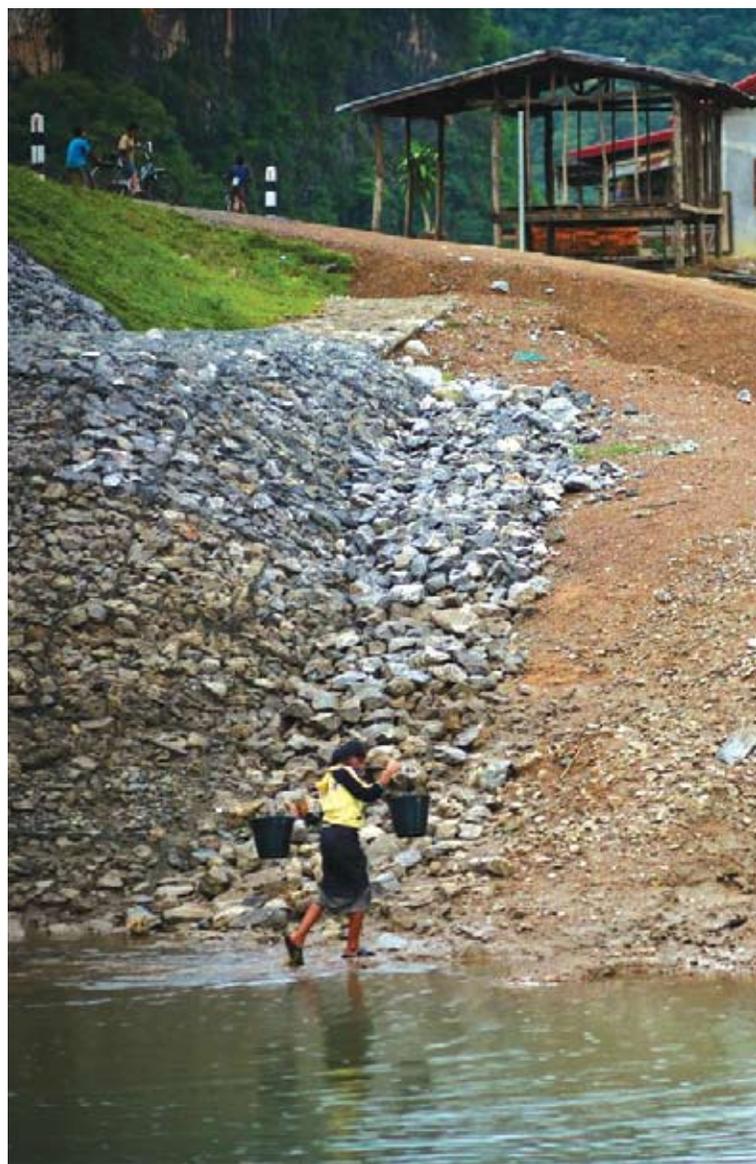


Photo by Junshien



Photo by Junshien

time available for girls' studies. Moreover, women are also responsible for family health and hygiene, which suffers when safe drinking water and sanitation facilities are either not available or difficult to access.

Deficiencies in water supply and sanitation (WSS) still cause many common illnesses and infections in Lao PDR, including diarrhea, which is a leading cause of child mortality in rural areas, negatively affecting both maternal and child health. Household surveys show that FHH consistently have less access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation (toilets or latrines) than MHH, across all ethnic groups.

While rural areas need major improvements, access to water and sanitation in urban centers and towns emerges as a challenge. Although urban areas account for around 27 percent of the population, household consumption and expenditure amount to 50 percent of the national total. The agriculture-centered economic structure is also rapidly changing. In 1998 agriculture accounted for over 53 percent of national gross domestic product. By 2008, it had declined to 35 percent, behind the services sector at 37 percent, and the industry sector increased from 22 percent to 28 percent.⁷⁴ The government considers inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure and services in small towns as an emerging challenge and has included this as an area that requires attention in its national development priorities (see Box 8).

Box 8: Gender Considerations in National Water and Sanitation Programs

In the 6th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) 2006-2010 the WSS targets aim to: raise access to safe water to 75 percent of the population; raise access to safe water in rural areas to 70 percent of the people; raise the coverage of toilet facilities meeting sanitary standards to 60 percent of the population; and raise the proportion of schools with sex-segregated sanitary facilities to 35 percent. The 7th NSED continues with these priorities in WSS but also places them within a context of improved small town development, and support to urbanization.

To meet the government's WSS targets, the National Center for Environmental Health and Water Supply (Nam Saat) under the Ministry of Health concentrates on increasing coverage, and is now giving priority to the country's poorest, least accessible, and most vulnerable zones. This involves delivering sustainable services through community participation, cost sharing, and decentralization of planning and implementation processes.

The National Rural WSS Sector Strategy integrates gender considerations into its action plan. The Strategy emphasizes the need to reduce the distances and time used for fetching water and to involve women at all levels of the decision-making process.

In small town water supply and sanitation projects, Lao PDR is piloting a scholarship program to female high school graduates to pursue water and sanitation or environmental engineering in college in order to expand the pool of qualified future human resources. Each provincial Nam Papa is also preparing a human resource development plan to improve their staff capacity, and developing a gender-equality recruitment and training strategy for female staff.

The GOL targets in the WSS sector under the 7th NSED include: i.) awarding 30 percent of scholarships and training in the sector to qualified women; and ii.) including gender activities into a minimum of 10 water utility corporate plans. ADB operational indicators for the sector still require gender-specifications.

Source: ADB 2011a.



Photo by The World Bank

Limitations in Sanitation Programs

Current sanitation activities are small-scale and often integrated in livelihoods projects.⁷⁵ Program activities focus on hygiene to various simple technology sanitation approaches aiming to eradicate open defecation, according to the target location. However, sanitation technology choices offered to households are limited. With limited choices available, public hygiene campaigns have been launched nation-wide, to complement community-led sanitation projects.

Women are primarily responsible for managing household water and maintaining sanitation facilities. Yet, they have little or no influence on crucial decisions about the cost and technology of water or sanitation systems. There is significant potential for empowering women and girls through participation in water policy development, water engineering, maintenance and repairs, education and awareness raising on water and sanitation, and financial management of water and sanitation systems. Current training and job opportunities are mostly provided to men, and women will significantly benefit from such opportunities.⁷⁶



Chapter 2 - Economic Empowerment: Balancing opportunities and risks

Over the past two decades, Lao PDR's economy has sustained strong growth. Driven by expanding natural resource exports, steady agricultural growth and a rebound in tourism and processing industries, average annual GDP growth maintained at around 7.9 percent between 2006-10, while the global economic crises in 2008-09 only slightly weakened the economy.⁷⁷ In the medium-term, the economic outlook remains favorable.⁷⁸ Lao PDR is also fortunate to have a young and growing population able to help boost the labor market. This chapter begins by reviewing the intersections between gender, poverty and vulnerability. As economic opportunities also bring risks, the chapter also shows the gender dimensions of market and credit access, as well as infrastructure.

Gender, Poverty and Vulnerability

Despite economic growth, food poverty and insecurity are still critical issues in rural areas of Lao PDR. Nearly one in four rural households in Lao PDR were below the food poverty line in 2007/08. And two-thirds of rural households have livelihoods that put them at risk of food insecurity in the event of one or more shocks, such as floods, drought and development projects, in a given year.

Poverty is an overwhelmingly rural phenomenon in Lao PDR, with high concentrations in the remote and mountainous northeastern and eastern borders with Viet Nam, where smaller ethnic groups predominate.⁷⁹ While poverty rates have nearly halved to 25 percent in 2010, from 46 percent in 1993, there are large numbers of households still living close to the poverty line.⁸⁰

Households continue to be highly vulnerable to regular seasonal shortages, as well as to agricultural shocks.⁸¹ These vulnerabilities and shocks have gender dimensions. In rural households, women most commonly take responsibility for raising livestock. In times of epidemic, effected livestock can substantially affect women's livelihoods, as they are responsible for providing nourishment for their family. Additionally, unpredictable floods often devastate crops, leaving little behind for women to plant or harvest. Floods, drought, and epidemics stretch women's resources, further exposing them to vulnerabilities.⁸² Coping strategies depend on the household, and range from workers migrating to find seasonal employment, to agro-pastoralists selling livestock and petty traders using their savings.

Food poverty also has important gender dimensions related to maternal nutrition and reproductive health. However, these gender dimensions are presently under-researched. Poor maternal nutrition and health affects children's welfare and their prospects for overcoming poverty in the next generation. At the household level, poverty measures mask the gender dimensions of consumption, income and resource distribution, as well as possible inequities in decision-making. Intra-household



Photo by The World Bank

analysis of consumption, savings and assets is required in order to be able to identify gender differences in the severity of poverty experienced by individual family members.

Female-headed households (FHH) account for approximately 10 percent of households and are generally poorer than male-headed households (MHH). There is also some evidence that relative poverty rates between MHH and FHH vary across ethnic groups.^{xix} For example a social study undertaken to inform the World Bank's Rural Electrification Project in four southern provinces found that female-headed households are poorer on average. In the Southern province of Attapeu, only 8 percent of households were female headed but all of them were considered poor. In Sekong and Savannakhet approximately 80 percent of female-headed households were among the poor households.⁸³

Box 9: Poverty for Female Headed Households

Nationwide, 10 percent of households are female-headed: 14 percent in urban areas and 8.7 percent in rural areas. Among agricultural households, fewer than 5 percent are female-headed and this prevalence varies from 3 percent in the North to 6 percent in the Central and Southern regions. Widowhood is the main reason for female headship, though 20 percent of female household heads are married women whose spouses have migrated. Female household heads tend to be older than their male counterparts (by seven years, at the median) and to be significantly less literate than their male counterparts (31 percent fewer FHH can read and write without difficulty, compared to MHH).^{xx}

Source: GOL 2005.

rates and Lao language proficiency than the men in their villages, according to the 2006 Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA). The PPA also found extremely high maternal and infant mortality rates in the surveyed villages, even by national standards.



Photo by The World Bank

A high proportion of food-insecure households have low education and literacy rates. Women and men lacking primary education head approximately 71 percent of households with poor food consumption, and 66 percent of those with borderline food consumption.⁸⁴ Women in poor households have much lower literacy

^{xix} Calculations based on LECS4 data suggest variations in the poverty gap between Lao-Tai FHH, with a poverty rate of 22 percent (compared to their male counterparts at 18 percent), and Hmong-lu Mien FHH, with a poverty rate of 63 percent (compared to their male counterparts at 48 percent). The small sample size of FHH from the smaller ethnic groups suggests the figures should be interpreted with caution.

^{xx} For more information on FHHs see GOL 2005; FAO and MAF 2010. Profiles are based on data drawn primarily from LECS4 2007/8, and LECS3 (Boupha 2004); and the Lao Agriculture Census 1998/1999 (MPI and MAF 2009). Findings are from a survey of 1,479 households in 11 villages in Savannakhet and Champassak Province and field-testings in ten villages of Attapeu and Sekong Provinces (Sithivong and Sisouvang 2007).

Box 10: Research Aims to Better Understand Gender Dimensions of Ethnicity

Limited research exists about the gender dimensions among the 49 ethnic groups in Lao PDR, making it difficult to understand and appreciate the social, cultural and religious practices that influence gender roles within these distinct groups.

Poverty in Lao PDR is heavily concentrated in upland areas inhabited largely by non-Lao or remote ethnic communities. Recent qualitative research provides insight on the role of women in the country's poorest villages (representing 56 percent Mon Khmer and 17 percent Hmong-Mien).

- For the majority of villages, men perform tasks that are heavy, dangerous, solitary, done at night, and that require short bursts of energy. Women carry out most chores that are lighter, that can be done simultaneously with childcare, that require longer periods of time, and that are usually done in groups of two or more.
- The transformation from a subsistence-based to a market-oriented household economy has often been to the disadvantage of non-Lao-Tai women, whose cultural roles, and lack of skills, constrain them from entering into market production. In particular, Mon Khmer women's traditional status and power, which was closely linked to the production cycles of subsistence agriculture, has been reduced leaving them only with hard labor but no accompanying spiritual reward.
- One study cited in the PPA found that women in some ethnic groups were providing a major contribution to the survival of households coping with relocations, such as women from the Akha group in Long district who regularly now hire out women as female laborers, Lahu Shi girls who engage in prostitution, or Khmou girls who travel to Thailand in search of jobs.

Other studies show that in education, literacy and health, girls and women in minority ethnic groups are lagging behind their counterparts in Lao-Tai groups, suggesting that the issue of gender inequality goes beyond poverty factors. For example, the progress in enrollment rates of Lao Tai girls have not been shared by either boys or girls from other ethnic groups, and the least progress of any group is among the non-Lao-Tai girls. Additionally, the gender gap in education has closed significantly in urban areas except among the Mon Khmer groups among whom, while the overall enrollment of both boys and girls has increased, the gender gap is greater than in rural areas.

There is also evidence that traditional and largely patriarchal societies view of women have limited non-Lao-Tai women's ability to fully participate in society. For example, some non-Lao-Tai groups such as the Yao, Hmong and Akha have patrilineal systems (compared to Lao-Tai which practice matrilinear). It is said that women in these groups are silenced, their formal role is weaker, they are denied a role in community decision-making and generally speaking considered more powerless than their Lao-Tai counterparts.

Furthermore, a study of the Khmou Lue community, an ethnic-group of the Mon-Khmer, explained that an indigenous woman is viewed as being there to bear children, serve her father, her brother and later her husband and her family. In most cases, they do not have property rights and are excluded from roles of political leadership. However, both men and women lack power and choice, but women also lack material resources. Women in particular voiced concerns and experiences on issues such as rice insufficiency, time/labor constraints, vulnerability and low self-esteem/inferiority, asset inequality, isolation, children's needs, intra-household inequality and resource allocation issues, traditional belief and customs. Women also felt very vulnerable without literacy and numbers skills and therefore reluctant and ill-equipped to engage in the market.

The UNFPA reported that some ethnic practices and traditions such as birthing alone in the forest or making an animal sacrifice before attending hospital could increase risk of adverse health outcomes affecting predominantly non-Lao-Tai women. Additionally, the gap is significant between women of different ethnic groups with a third of all Lao Tai women giving birth in the presence of medical staff while only 11 percent of Khamu, 7.4 percent of Hmong, and 5.5 percent of women from other ethnic groups do.

Sources: Chamberlain 2006, King and van de Walle 2005, Khouangvichit 2010, World Bank 2003 and UNFPA 2008.

Agriculture and Rural Development

The labor market in Lao PDR is highly informal and agriculture-based. This means that more than 71 percent of households — including 40 percent of urban households — report agriculture, forestry, or fishing as their main activity, and most of this work is on family-run smallholdings.⁸⁵ Agriculture remains vitally important for economic growth and poverty reduction generally, as well as for women's economic empowerment. While agriculture in Lao PDR is becoming commercialized, most farming households are still engaged in subsistence or semi-subsistence production, with a gender division of labor that varies by ethnic group and regional poverty levels.

Increased agricultural productivity and opportunities for off-farm jobs are pulling some households, and certain regions, out of poverty, and providing new economic opportunities for women. For women in households and areas that have limited assets and access to credit, or those who lose access to productive land and lack the skills needed to earn income in other ways, commercialization of agriculture may increase vulnerability.

To cope with such change, formal social safety nets need to be developed. Rapid transitions such as these can cause social dislocation and strain social capital and other traditional coping mechanisms. Shifting from subsistence-based to market-oriented household economies is particularly difficult for women in non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups whose cultural roles, limited Lao language and technical skills and lack of business experience leave them unprepared to engage with the wider market.⁸⁶

Traditional Gender Divisions of Labor and Assets

Most farming households maintain a traditional gender division of labor for crops and livestock, although this is changing in some areas with livelihood diversification and increased out-migration of men. Tradition-



Photo by ADB

ally, women work in the fields (planting, weeding and harvesting crops), and tend to livestock. Men undertake select agricultural tasks of plowing, constructing bunds, and preparing seedbeds. Many households depend on livestock as an important source of consumption as well as cash income, with women predominating in production of pigs, poultry and goats, while men are mainly responsible for larger livestock, such as cattle and buffalo.⁸⁷ Lowland or upland, decision-making with regard to irrigation and water resources management is often considered men's work, even though women are most likely to be the primary household water managers. Even in one of the most successful irrigation projects in terms of community mobilization, women's representation in the newly formulated irrigation water user groups remained at 35 percent as against the original target of 50 percent.⁸⁸ This is largely due to women's lack of landownership and their "time poverty" due to their multiple roles.

There is also a traditional gender division of labor in fisheries. Fishpond culture and rice-cum-fish cultivation have become more important in recent decades. Women are especially engaged in managing fish ponds and fish culture in the rice fields, while men are more often catching wild fish from the Mekong River and its tributaries. Women also play a key role in fish processing and marketing.

Box 11: 'Time Poverty' Constrains Women in Rural Areas

The presence of rigid gender roles in rural societies constrains women's time allocation among paid and unpaid productive and household activities, leading to "time poverty". Domestic activities that are time-intensive and physically arduous, such as fetching water and fuel, are generally the domain of female household members, and are more demanding in areas lacking basic infrastructure such as water and electricity.

The effects of this domestic burden on women's economic opportunities are often neglected in policies aimed at increasing female participation in productive paid employment. First, the time burden of rural women's domestic unpaid work and the lack of substitutability of female labor in such tasks as birth and care of young infants limit women's choices in accessing paid employment. Second, female time poverty contributes to unequal education outcomes which hinders women competing for more skilled, better paid jobs. When men do not substitute for women in domestic labor, female children are often called on to share this burden (boys are generally sent to the fields, but they work fewer hours). This contributes to lower school enrollments and attainments for girls and reinforces girls' weaker position in the labor market.

Sources: FAO, IFAD and ILO 2010.

Both women and men collect and manage various forest resources. Forests contribute to household food security, particularly in between agricultural seasons, and are an important economic resource. Traditionally, women tend to collect NTFPs such as bamboo shoots, roots, wild vegetables, mushrooms, fruits, nuts, honey and insects, while men hunt animals. Women dominate the NTFP sector and the forest products they collect are an important part of their diets.⁸⁹ Because of deforestation and poor forestland management, under-privileged women now report that it takes them longer to find the NTFPs they need for subsistence.⁹⁰ This is significant, as marketed NTFPs have traditionally contributed 46-60 percent of household income in rural upland areas, and this figure rises to 80 percent in

areas that are most severely deprived. NTFPs are particularly important for rural non-Lao-Tai households who cultivate less productive land in harsher upland areas and rely heavily on forest resources for income, as compared to Lao-Tai households.⁹¹

Box 12: National Gender Strategy Focuses on Agriculture and Forestry

Lao PDR's 2009 Gender Mainstreaming Strategy for agriculture and forestry has 6 main priorities:

- i.) strengthening institutions for the advancement of women into the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and its related institutions and programs at all levels;
- ii.) increasing the gender awareness and responsiveness of MAF staff at all levels;
- iii.) integrating gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data/information/statistics into the MAF planning cycle;
- iv.) enhancing the qualifications, competencies and core skills of women within the MAF-workforce so they can advance at all levels;
- v.) increasing rural women's access to and control over resources and benefits; and
- vi.) enhancing ties with the external constituencies that support the advancement of women in agriculture and forestry.

These priorities are being included in the 2011-15 National Agriculture Strategy. The 7th NSEDP for 2010-15 also includes gender targets such as the increased percentage of women receiving training in technology, agricultural production, processing, handicraft and services to 20 percent and those related to increased percentage of women's participation in policy and project planning.

MAF at the central and provincial levels needs substantial support to build its staff capacity in integrating gender analysis in the planning cycle and collecting and monitoring sex-disaggregated data. Ongoing ADB technical assistance (TA) to MAF supports this. The tools and methodologies introduced in the TA are to be applied to ongoing donor-financed agriculture and forestry projects implemented by MAF.

Sources: MAF 2009 and ADB 2011f.



Photo by The World Bank

Access to Land and Property: Customary Barriers Persist

Women's access and control over land and housing is key for promoting gender equity and empowerment.⁹² Asset access and control significantly contributes to women's livelihood options, economic and social security, and poverty alleviation. More broadly, it also increases the likelihood of children surviving, attending school and receiving healthcare and reduces the risk of families falling into poverty and destitution following widowhood, spousal desertion, or protracted illness. It is also an important driver for improved agricultural production and transition into market-based systems as secure access to and control over land resources translates into enhanced investment in land-based production (such as cash cropping), and also serves as a form of collateral for investment in non-farm activity.⁹³

In Lao PDR, women and men have equal status under the law with regard to land tenure, property ownership and inheritance rights. Land and property laws state, "property that is acquired before marriage received through inheritance, or granted specifically to a particular spouse, is not considered as conjugal property".⁹⁴ Land acquired by a couple is to be issued a joint land use certificate or title with co-signatures of wife and husband. The 2005 Prime Minister's Decree 192, on compensation and resettlement for people affected by development projects, states that "All affected persons, regardless of land use right, will be entitled to compensation for lost assets at replacement cost, and provided with other assistance during the transition period, and economic rehabilitation assistance to ensure that they

are not worse off due to the project".⁹⁵

Women have benefited from increasing rates of female and joint land titling. However, to date only about one-third of the country's estimated 1.6 million registrable land parcels have been titled mainly in urban and peri-urban settings, and a significant proportion of state land remains unmapped and unregistered. Occupants of land who lack formally assigned titles remain vulnerable to eviction or expropriation without compensation.

There are also risks for both women and men associated with the government's broader national policies and practices regarding village consolidation and resettlement. As the country accelerates the use of its natural resources, the number of development or investment projects (particularly hydropower, mining and agribusiness) that require significant resettlement is increasing. The government has policy in place for dealing with this (Decree 192). However, the enforcement of this policy is uneven. In addition, the government's own village consolidation policy is resulting in both a physical relocation process and an administrative process. Women are particularly vulnerable in such settings to: losing land and use-rights; being underserved by agricultural extension agents; dropping out of school at higher levels; and having higher labor burdens through increase in agricultural wage labor, or through participation in prostitution or cross-border migration.⁹⁶ UNIAP (2008) has found that the proportion of trafficked women from resettled villages is disproportionately high.

Labor Force Participation

The most recent Population Census suggests that only around 6 percent of the population, or around 13 percent of the active labor force, works in a formal sector.^{xxi} Though public sector jobs outnumber private sector jobs at present, private sector development will be the main engine for growth and poverty reduction, according to the 7th NESDP. With this said, average male and female labor force participation are almost equal (for ages 15-64 at 79.5 percent for women and 81 percent for men), and are higher in rural than in urban areas.⁹⁷

^{xxi} "Informal sector" is defined here as individuals who report being "own account workers" or "unpaid family workers." Depending on the definition, some of the workers employed in private sector units should also be defined as informal sector workers (GOL, 2005).

Table 16: Labor Force Participation of Males and Females Aged 15-64

	1995 Census			2005 Census				
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Rural with road	Rural without road
Female	83.1	61.1	88.1	79.5	64.2	86.4	85.5	88.5
Male	83.5	69.8	86.5	81.0	71.0	85.9	85.1	87.9
Total	83.3	65.4	87.4	80.3	67.5	86.1	85.3	88.2

Sources: GOL 1995 and 2005.

Across all age and location categories, the proportion of economically active girls is substantially higher than the proportion of economically active boys. In urban areas, for example, nearly 40 percent of girls aged 15-19 work; compared to only about 28 percent of boys

the same age.⁹⁸ This is likely due to boys' higher participation rates in secondary and tertiary education, as well as the lower age of marriage for girls, especially in rural areas.

Table 17: Children and Youth Employed, by Age, Sex and Location

Urban			Rural On-Road		Rural Off-Road	
Age	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
10-14	3.8	6.3	14.0	22.1	23.0	36.0
15-19	27.5	38.6	52.2	70.7	61.7	81.7

Source: Population Census 2005.

Unpaid family work is much more common among women than men. The vast majority of the workforce, both female and male, is self-employed but there are significant gender differences in how this work is compensated. The 2005 Population Census identifies more than 64 percent of economically active women and girls as "unpaid family workers," compared to only 27 percent of economically active men and boys in this category. Conversely, more than 56 percent of men

and boys are identified as "own account workers," running their own enterprises, compared to 26 percent of women and girls.

On average, women and girls work more hours per day than men and boys. Income-generating activities combined with household work occupy female household members for 6.4 hours per day, compared to 5.2 hours for male household members.

Figure 8 and 9: Employment of economically active population aged 10+, by sex



Source: GOL 2005.

Second to the agriculture sector, 15 percent of women are reportedly in services and 6 percent in garment manufacturing and export production. Less than one percent works in the fields of mining and electricity, water or construction. Overall, the country has experi-

enced job growth in the last planning period. The 6th NSEDP target for new job creation was exceeded by 18 percent, with the greatest gains in services, followed by industry and construction.⁹⁹

Table 18: Time Used on Main Activities by Sex, Hours per Day

Activity	Female	Male	All
Income-generating activities	4.0	4.7	4.3
Work as employed	0.3	0.8	0.5
Own business work	0.7	0.4	0.6
Agricultural work	2.1	2.3	2.2
Collecting firewood/fetching water	0.4	0.2	0.3
Hunting/fishing	0.1	0.7	0.4
Construction	0.0	0.1	0.1
Handicraft	0.3	0.1	0.2
Household work	2.4	0.5	1.5
School	0.9	1.2	1.0
Sleeping, eating, leisure time	15.2	15.9	15.5
Travel, others	1.5	1.7	1.6

Sources: LECS4 2007/08.

Wage Employment on a Steady Rise

Over a decade, from 1995-05, the proportion of women in wage employment nationwide increased from 38 to 44 percent. Factories producing mainly export goods have been established in urban areas and smaller family-based companies provide a growing number of wage employment opportunities. In rural areas, the transition from subsistence farming to cash crops such as coffee, tea and rubber is also creating more wage jobs. New wage jobs can provide women with new income sources and opportunities for financial independence, but without a reallocation of their gender-based domestic duties to other household members, wage employment can also worsen women's "time poverty" as they are forced to simultaneously balance their jobs with household chores.

Gender Wage Gaps Remain Unsolved

The most prevalent form of gender discrimination in labor markets is wage gaps between male and female workers. Differences also exist in job security, types of work and working conditions.¹⁰⁰ Female workers on average earn lower salaries, wages and other kinds of remuneration than male workers. This is partly because average wages in the textile and garment industries, where women predominate, are lower than those in other industries such as mining and quarrying, where men predominate. According to research conducted by the Gender Resource Information and Development Center (GRID) in 2006, the average monthly wage of female workers was about two-thirds that of their male counterparts.¹⁰¹ The Lao Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) reports that, in private business, a growing number of women hold management positions, but female managers are paid only half as much as men in comparable positions.¹⁰² There is also some evidence that women are more likely than men to be seasonal and temporary workers.¹⁰³

Gender disparities are much higher in management and administrative positions than in technical staff positions.^{xxii} Among technical staff, the largest proportions of women are in creative arts and entertainment activities; health and social work; education; information and communications; accommodation and food services; manufacturing; and “other” services. The smallest proportions are in industries with heavy physical work, such as mining and construction.

Women Increasingly Own Firms

Many women run or help run small, often informal, family businesses. Nationally, household businesses headed by women slightly outnumber those headed by men (women head 52 percent), but in rural areas the opposite is true (women head 47 percent).¹⁰⁴ Whereas female owned business is less popular in rural areas, in urban centers, women increasingly own their own businesses. In 2009, a national enterprise survey by the World Bank found that 31 percent of businesses were partly or fully female-owned.^{xxiii} And a GIZ survey in 5 provinces found that the share of businesses owned or managed by women rose from 36 percent in 2005 to 41 percent in 2009.^{xxiv}

Newly registered firms by women in the formal sector are increasing. In 2010, women owned 54.8 percent of newly registered firms, compared to only 43.9 percent in 2009.¹⁰⁵ Women in Lao PDR are generally young when they start a business. In a 2004 survey of micro and small enterprises in 5 provinces, nearly half of all female respondents claim to have started their enterprise when they were less than 30 years old (9 percent were younger than 20 years and 40 percent were aged 20-29 years). Women’s enterprises were more likely to be home-based or located in the marketplace, whereas men’s businesses were much more likely to be mobile.

^{xxv} A recent study found that only 5 percent of women-owned enterprises in Lao PDR used electric or motorized equipment, compared with 48 percent of men’s enterprises.¹⁰⁶

Both women and men report marketing and lack of start-up finance and working capital as the key factors hampering business entry. Only female entrepreneurs report that their household responsibilities and lack of mobility due to personal duties makes it more difficult for them than men to start a business.¹⁰⁷ They also have found the business licensing costs too high. The 2011 rollout of the new enterprise registration system aims to reduce licensing cost by 35 percent, compared with that under the previous system. As a result, among the additional about 65,000 registrations under the new system, 44 percent were women, a slightly higher proportion than the previous 40 percent in 2008.¹⁰⁸ A 2004 survey identified the different needs for women and men to start a business. For example, women need training in fields such as marketing, business management and trading, whereas men identified needs for training in mechanical and technical skills, marketing and livestock husbandry.¹⁰⁹

The legal framework for doing business in Lao PDR does not have gender discriminatory elements. In practice however, significant differences are observed between female owned firms (FOFs) and male-owned firms, according to data from the 2009 Enterprise Survey.¹¹⁰ First, FOFs are smaller than male-owned firms: they have fewer employees and 2.5 times less turnover. The average size of businesses owned by women on start-up is 29.5 employees, compared with 94.9 for start-ups owned by men. Second, FOFs are growing much faster than firms owned by men. The average women-owned business had more than doubled its number of employees from 2006-09.

^{xxii} Data collected in 2009 from 728 firms, including micro-enterprises, in five provinces: Vientiane Capital, Luang Prabang, Champassaak, Savannakhet and Luang Namtha (GIZ 2009).

^{xxiii} The survey covered registered businesses with more than 5 employees. While a 31 percent female ownership rate compares favorably with averages in many other countries and regions, it remains below the average for East Asia (Davies and Record 2010).

^{xxiv} This SME survey covered 728 formal and informal sector businesses, including micro-enterprises, in five provinces: Vientiane Capital, Luang Prabang, Champassaak, Savannakhet and Luang Namtha, using the Ministry of Industry and Commerce handicraft classification system for SMEs: micro (1-4 employees with total assets less than 70M kip); small (5-19 employees with total assets less than 250M kip); medium (20-99 employees with total assets less than 1,200M kip) (GIZ 2009).

^{xxv} Based on a field survey of 250 entrepreneurs (150 women and 100 men) in Lao PDR, covering five major provinces: Vientiane Capital, Vientiane Province, Savannakhet, Champassaak and Luang Prabang (LWU/GRID and ILO 2004).



Photo by The World Bank

FOFs are more likely to operate in the retail sector. Nearly half of all businesses owned by women are in retail. FOFs are less likely to be part of a larger group of companies, and less likely to be foreign-owned. Fourth, FOFs employ more female workers and use less technology, and their senior managers tend to be less educated than those in male-owned firms. Only 20 percent of FOFs, compared with 43 percent of male-owned firms, employ a top manager with a graduate degree from a foreign university.

FOFs are less likely to have a bank account overdraft or credit line. Those that do have a credit line are typically required to have greater collateral than male-owned firms. The top three constraints cited by both types of firms are: tax rates, access to finance and an inadequately educated workforce, but FOFs are more likely than male firms to cite financial obstacles as the largest constraint.

Box 13: National Government Plans for SME Development

The Government through the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Promotion and Development Office (SMEPDO) has drafted the National SME Development Plan, 2011–2015. The plan includes an intervention on effective gender mainstreaming through empowerment of female entrepreneurs. Key female entrepreneur empowerment activities such as improved business development service support, improved access to financial capitals, gender equal participation in regulatory impact assessments and sex-disaggregated enterprise database are identified under the plan for implementation. **The SME Law has been endorsed and declared effective by the National Assembly on December 21, 2011.**

Source: ADB 2011d.

Access to Markets and Credits

Access to markets and market information is difficult for many entrepreneurs in Lao PDR, including women. In more remote areas where many non-Lao ethnic groups are concentrated, access to markets and financial services is very limited, and middlemen mostly control market prices, leaving little bargaining power for individual farmers or producers. Traditional norms limiting women's mobility can further restrict their access to markets. Poor public infrastructure also adds to the costs of small enterprises such as handicraft production, in which women predominate. Additionally, no systematic marketing information service is available for producers, and little or no market information is provided in newspapers or on radio or television. Women's lower levels of literacy and Lao language proficiency particularly disadvantage them in accessing market information. An expanding private sector is creating opportunities for entrepreneurs, but women often experience more difficulty than men accessing these prospects.

Box 14: Monitoring for Outcomes on Young Women's Entrepreneurship and Employment Strategies

Lao PDR's STEPS program (Supporting Talent Entrepreneurial Potential and Success) is part of the World Bank's Adolescent Girls Initiative. Launched in December 2010, with support from AusAID, the program set out to provide young people, in particular young women, with entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. The Bank explored two models: i.) a market-place competition to identify, train and support young women who were interested in starting-up or expanding a small business; and ii.) the establishment of career-counseling offices at two educational institutions, in order to provide students with employment services to improve their future job prospects. The latter in particular was the first of its kind in the country.

Based on the follow-up data collected on program beneficiaries at mid-point in the program, there is evidence that both models are achieving the program's stated goals toward the dual promotion of entrepreneurship and employability of young people, especially young women.

The key outcomes include:

- 37 percent of Marketplace Competition participants (almost half female) reported having started a new business or expanded a pre-existing business 7-8 months after completing the STEPS training; and
- 49 percent of the graduates registered with the Career Counseling Office at the National University of Laos (more than half female) and 41 percent at Pakpasak Technical College (more than a third female) reported they were employed within 2-3 months of graduation.

Results showed that the number of jobs created was encouraging. Additionally, external capital, and profitability of businesses and income of graduates was raised. Based on the initial results, an additional year of funding was received from AusAID in order to build on the knowledge-base and experience of what works in women's entrepreneurship and employment initiatives and to allow for integration with the Bank's larger strategic initiatives in Lao PDR.

Sources: AGI-STEPS Monitoring Report 2012 and World Bank 2012.

Formal Microfinance Sector Development

Most households rely on informal networks of family and friends for credit. Borrowing from moneylenders is less common. In 2006, only about 6.5 percent of the country's population aged 15-64 belonged to organizations providing microfinance.¹¹¹ Providers that

reach the largest number of clients are those supported by development projects and special funds. Since 2007, however, 11 new commercial banking licenses have been issued in the country, including banks that have experience with reaching poorer borrowers.

As in many other countries, microfinance in Lao PDR has a strong female client base. According to the 2006 Lao Rural and Microfinance Statistics, microfinance schemes only covered slightly more than one-third of the villages surveyed, such as those run by development projects, government agencies, banks and NGOs.^{xxvi} These microfinance schemes are mostly semi-formal and as data on informal saving groups demonstrated, more women than men participate. Women make up 61 percent of microfinance savers nationally. The average size of individual women's microfinance savings (204,000 LAK) is almost twice that of men's (106,000 LAK).¹¹² The difference may be due partly to the LWU's well-developed service network.^{xxvii}

The Northern region lags behind other parts of the country in microfinance activity. In the Central region, female clients' savings are seven times that of male clients. In the South, even though the numbers of female and male clients are not very large, female savers are twice as numerous as male savers and save five times more. In the North, the amounts of saving by women and men are similar. This is likely due to the fact that

many microfinance providers in this region offer services to households rather than specifically targeting women. Additionally, projects and funds initiated by women's groups are less widely organized in the North than in other parts of the country.¹¹³

For many women, the cultural stigma associated with debt and low levels of financial literacy are barriers to credit access. Evidence gathered in Vientiane Capital in 2003 from a number of large markets demonstrates that women avoid financial formalities to get loans and lack confidence to enter formal banking institutions.¹¹⁴ They prefer to get quick loans from moneylenders offering simple loan procedures, or join informal savings schemes and credit groups. Due to these preferences and lack of familiarity with formal banking, women often depend heavily on their husbands to access capital. Few women are aware that they can use their land as collateral for loans from banks. Many women take a loan in their husband's name, as husbands often have greater financial literacy and are more comfortable with formal banking procedures, including loan repayment.

Infrastructure: Electricity, Transport, Mining and Hydropower

Electricity

Electricity grid connections in Lao PDR jumped dramatically during 1995-2010. Coverage went from just 16 percent in 1995 to almost 67 percent of households (700,000) in 2010.¹¹⁵ Rural-urban disparities remain in electricity coverage: although 99 percent of urban communities have electricity, this is contrasted with a mere 48 percent coverage among rural communities.¹¹⁶ To tackle this challenge, the government plans to extend the grid to road-accessible rural areas, and to promote "off-grid" energy development in more remote areas. The coverage target is for 90 percent of households to have access to electricity by 2020.



Photo by ADB

^{xxvi} 3,420 of the 9,111 villages surveyed had microfinance coverage. The survey covered about 90 percent of all villages in Lao PDR (NERI 2006).

^{xxvii} LWU reports that in 2008 it supported 1,142 savings groups, which averaged 100 members and savings of nearly 115 million LAK per group.

Access to electricity helps close gender gaps through a number of pathways. Increased electrification reduces the time spent on labor-intensive domestic chores performed mainly by women and girls, allowing greater flexibility in organizing household activities (including productive tasks). Surveys of newly electrified rural households also show that access to grid electricity has increased women's income-generating activities. For example, by enabling electric water pumping for vegetable gardens and household industries, or the use of refrigerators for micro and small businesses that serve tourists, women have greater access to income-generating activities. Evidence suggests that electricity not only helps extend hours for both productive and leisure activities in the country, but also translates into better educational outcomes, improved social and community services, and better security, particularly for women and girls.

Box 15: Power to the Poor: Connecting female-headed households to the grid

Poor households that remain unconnected to the grid tend to be disproportionately female-headed. Affordability of connection fees (equivalent to US\$100) is reportedly the major constraint for these households. Recognizing that the extent to which poor rural households will benefit from grid extension depends on the pricing of services—particularly connection fees—the national Power Company, *Électricité De Lao*, has implemented a Power to the Poor (P2P) pilot program to provide interest-free loan financing of house-wiring costs for the poorest households. Household required payments are scheduled monthly over a period of three years, ensuring the house-wiring outlay is budget-neutral for the household. As a result, the connection rate increased from 78 percent to 95 percent in pilot villages and power supply has improved. Among female-headed households (which comprise 8 percent of all households, but 43 percent of all poor households), household connectivity increased from 63 percent to 90 percent. Cleaner energy was available to households at a cheaper cost than traditional polluting sources of diesel lamps and car batteries. The P2P program is now being scaled-up nationally. In March 2012, close to 28,000 households – including 1,300 female headed households – had gained access to electricity through P2P.

Sources: Mette, Boatman and Chanthalin 2009; Larsen 2009; and World Bank, 2010e.

Transport

Better roads provide improved access to services, infrastructure and market opportunities, creating benefits for local residents, including women. Benefits include improved access to schools, health facilities, agricultural extension and other basic services, new income-generating activities such as ecotourism and cultural tourism, and enhanced opportunities for work in nearby towns.^{xxviii} Rural access roads are particularly important for improving the lives of rural women and girls by easing the drudgery of their productive and reproductive work.

While almost all villages in Lao PDR are accessible during the dry season, 16 percent of villages have no road access during the rainy season.¹¹⁷ Improvement of the

road network is a key poverty reduction strategy and a core element of the government's NGPES as road access is a general determinant of the availability of water and electricity in a village.

However, increased road expansion into remote areas also carries risks, especially for women. Road access can also unfortunately facilitate illegal logging, hunting of wildlife and overharvesting of NTFPs, therein damaging the fragile ecosystem on which many rural households, and poor women's livelihoods in particular, depend. It opens up remote areas to road construction workers, truckers, traders and tourists, potentially increasing the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs.¹¹⁸ To combat the latter, the MPWT has been collaborating with the National Committee for Control of AIDS (NCCA) to mainstream HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention within infrastructure

^{xxviii} Thammanosouth, S. et al. (2012) argue that such positive gender impacts of road development are not always the case, drawing on the surveys conducted in four villages along or near the National Route 3. The research indicated that the road development did not automatically improve people's mobility, and when it does, men get more mobility than women. Research also found that where income increase was found among women, this did not result in the change in the gender division of labor at home.

projects in Lao PDR, focusing particularly on vulnerable groups such as young women and men living in remote areas. MPWT prepared a HIV Strategic Plan 2010-2015 highlighting: situational analysis; work with decision-makers; training for MPWT staff; prevention, treatment, and care; stigma reduction; and reduction of substance abuse.¹¹⁹

The “investment climate” conditions of border procedures also appear to unduly harm women traders. A recent World Bank study (2011) has called for more custom automation to avoid this.¹²⁰ Finally, in areas with public transport, including urban areas, women predominate among producers and traders using such services and thus feel the impacts of poor service quality more acutely.¹²¹ Limited mobility of women where it exists impacts their bargaining power in markets, resulting in lower prices for their goods.¹²²

Women often perceive road impacts differently from men.¹²³ Recognizing this, the NGPES calls for the integration of gender considerations into road projects through the following steps: i.) gender and social assessments of new road projects; ii.) monitoring of project impacts for inclusion of women in community consultations on new road construction; and iii.) expanded involvement of women in community road maintenance committees. More recently, approved projects, including the ADB Northern Rural Infrastructure Project, support these gender considerations. The project is designed to provide for at least 15 percent of jobs in construction and maintenance, 30 percent of participation in road maintenance committees, HIV and human trafficking awareness of construction workers and communities, gender awareness of the ministry staff at the central, provincial, and district levels and the issuance of land certificates under both spouses’ names in the case of resettlement or land acquisition.¹²⁴

At the community level, the Ministry of Public Works and Transport’s (MPWT) Community Road Model Implementation Guidelines (2005) provide for separate consultations with men and with women, and require villages to include one or more women on their village maintenance committees (VMCs) to ensure women have a continuing voice in decisions and participate in road maintenance. However, there are indications

that these specific measures have not been fully implemented, and are insufficient to prevent all negative impacts.¹²⁵

Mining and Hydropower Development

Mining and hydropower combined contributed 2.5 percent of the annual 7 percent growth from 2007-10.¹²⁶ While large gains can be realized at national and local levels, the potential for socioeconomic risks such as landlessness, resource loss, food insecurity and a decrease in social capital are persistent threats, with important gender dimensions.¹²⁷

In cases when hydropower and mining projects disrupt local livelihoods, women’s activities often bear the brunt of the negative impacts as they rely on common resources for their livelihoods (land and water) and generally own less alienable land than men for which they might otherwise receive compensation. The influx of large construction crews into a remote area also increases the risks of STDs for local communities, especially for young women and girls engaged in sex work.

International experience indicates that women hold only a small percentage (5-6 percent) of jobs in these industries.¹²⁸ The tendency for large-scale mining to be male-dominated is heightened by traditional gender roles and education gaps between women and men, particularly in rural areas and among non-Lao-speaking ethnic groups. The two large international mining companies operating in Lao PDR – Lang Xang Minerals Ltd (LXML) at Sepon in Savannakhet Province and Phu Bia Mining Ltd in Phu Bia – have progressive human resource policies that seek to expand women’s employment in mining. Women are concentrated in administrative or support roles such as cooks and cleaners, rather than in operational roles in mining. Women account for 77 percent of the administration department workforce at Sepon mine, though much smaller percentages for workers in operational departments.¹²⁹

Gender sensitive planning and benefit-sharing approaches can help mitigate negative impacts on local communities from large mining and hydro projects and also increase local benefits and project sustainability.

Such approaches can include gender sensitive consultations, careful analysis of gender issues, arrangements for revenue sharing; establishment of community development funds with strong representation of women; and development of employment opportunities and ancillary services with a focus on opportunities to women.¹³⁰

Box 16: Addressing Gender Concerns in Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project

The US\$1.45 billion Nam Theun 2 project supported by the World Bank and ADB has made concerted efforts to take gender issues into consideration, both during project design and implementation. For example a comprehensive gender assessment was conducted during project design. This assessment found that women and girls, especially from marginalized ethnic groups and those from poor households, had limited access to education, off-farm employment, production markets, cash assets and sociopolitical empowerment. Intensified support for women in project areas would be required, so a Gender Strategy and Action Plan was developed that included participatory monitoring mechanisms, income generation and skills development for women, training, and community education on alcoholism, domestic violence and STDs including HIV/ AIDS.

During project implementation, land titles for resettled villagers were issued jointly to husband and wife and all compensation payments have to be handed over jointly to husband and wife. Special efforts were also taken to ensure that the downstream livelihood programs responded to gender issues. When it became clear that some vulnerable households (often elderly widows) were unable to take advantage of the more labor-intensive opportunities, new livelihoods were added, such as raising chickens and pigs. Women are active in the management of Village Income Restoration Fund for the downstream program, and other types of income generating groups such as handicraft.

Source: Porter and Shivakumar 2011.

Artisanal Mining

While artisanal mining has the smallest economic impact on the economy, it has disproportionately large social and gender impacts.¹³¹ Unregistered artisanal mining activities have been reported for at least 9 provinces. United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) estimates that nationally at least 8,000 people are engaged in artisanal mining activities, much of it seasonal work supplementing subsistence agricultural livelihoods in rural areas. Others suggest that the real figure for artisanal mining sector participation is significantly higher.¹³² Gender impacts are significant in such sub-sectors as artisanal gold, gemstone and tin mining in the country where more than 75 percent of these miners are women.¹³³ In tin mining in particular, artisanal miners work as family units with women and men, boys and girls and sometimes, elderly women and men working together. Construction, sand and gravel mining is less seasonal, and includes a 40 percent female workforce.

Artisanal miners have limited knowledge of health, safety, and environmental risks. Initial reports suggest that the use of mercury in artisanal mining in Lao PDR is restricted and significantly lower than in other parts of the world. However, where mercury is used to recover gold particles, women undertake the amalgamation and mercury evaporation process without protective equipment in their kitchens at home, usually with children present. International experience suggests that targeted gender-sensitive health and safety campaigns combined with the introduction of cheap and accessible technology and simple protective equipment (such as latex gloves) could reduce mercury exposure to women and children by more than 90 percent.

Box 17: Women Dominate Mining Produce Initiative

One alternative livelihood scheme that successfully targeted poor producers, especially women, was Phu Bia Mining's 'Locally Grown Produce Initiative', which has operated since 2008 in villages affected by the Phu Kham Copper-Gold and Gold Heap Leach operations. Operated primarily through trust fund-type schemes, and jointly managed by the Company and the Government, the market garden scheme features 95 percent female membership. Female farmers are able to earn income by selling vegetables directly to the mine.

The initiative involves working closely with the Ministry of Health and supports various mass organizations, such as the Lao Women's Union (LWU) and Lao Youth Union (LYU). Additionally, for education and awareness campaigns it is supported by several international organizations such as the Red Cross and Population Services International (PSI).

Sources: World Bank 2011 and Earth Systems Lao et. al. 2009a.

Tourism: Important Opportunities, Potential Risks

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in Lao PDR. Tourist arrivals have almost tripled since 2003-08. Tourism now contributes to 7–9 percent of the GDP and generates employment for women in the formal hospitality industry and other informal services. Currently, most tourism employment opportunities are in urban and peri-urban areas. As there is strong public and private sector interest in developing the tourist industry, human resources development has been identified as a major requirement to assist this process. It has been estimated that by 2015, tourism could directly employ more than 100,000 people and involve the same number in indirectly linked activities.¹³⁴

Male and female workers engage in different activities within the tourism sector. Women are employed mainly by hotels and guesthouses; food service providers; bars; travel agencies; and tour companies. They are generally underrepresented at management levels but predominate in customer service and cleaning. Transport and repair services, in contrast, are almost exclusively male-operated. There are also indirect opportunities for income generation in tourism, for example through petty trade or direct sales to tourists. It is common for women to make and sell handicrafts to tourists and also to operate food and drink stands.¹³⁵

Eco and village tourism may add to women's workload but can also bring income to the family. Ecotourism and village tourism brings new benefits and resources to rural areas, but the gender division of labor, resources, and decision making in local communities means that women and men do not share the benefits or burdens equally. Because of their childcare responsibilities, and traditional restrictions on interactions with outsiders, women are less able to take advantage of new opportunities for jobs or training, or can only do so if unmarried. Local men are more likely to secure new income-generating and leadership roles, while local women tend to work in lower-paid and lower-status activities, such as providing accommodation and meals and participating in cultural entertainment.¹³⁶ While potentially increasing cash incomes, some initiatives such as home-stays by tourists may also increase women's workload with little recognition of, or compensation for, their efforts. This is because the additional labor of caring for tourist guests is often considered a natural extension of their unremunerated domestic responsibilities.¹³⁷

Expansion of tourism carries social risks, particularly for young women and girls. Gender impacts of community-based tourism also vary by age. An increase in community-based tourism may lead to a reduction in girls' school attendance if families assign girls to assist their mothers with tourism-related work.¹³⁸ The influx of tourists to remote areas, and the migration of young



Photo by ADB

people from rural areas to cities and towns to work in tourism, increases the risk of STD and HIV/AIDS transmission. This risk is especially high for young women

(and men) doing work in hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and nightclubs who may be drawn into part-time or full-time sex work.

Box 18: The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Sustainable Tourism Development Project

Started in 2009, the project, executed by the Lao National Tourism Administration, promotes protection and conservation of cultural and environmental heritage, supports community-based tourism and its value chains (such as trade and food and handicraft production), and develops the GMS tourism corridors. For women to engage in higher-paid and more sustainable tourism-related employment, the project provides a number of income generation and business skills training, particularly aiming at ethnic minority women. By 2011, more than 40 percent of such training has been given to women, and 15-50 percent of tour guide trainees are women. Women from smaller ethnic groups, who previously earned no cash income, now make income from selling tickets for nature sites, food, textiles, bamboo paper, palm sugar, and other handicrafts. The project also links up with the ongoing human trafficking and HIV awareness programs of the government.

Source: ADB 2011g.



Chapter 3 - Agency: **Leveling the playing field for women's participation and voice**

Women's rights are recognized in the legal system, and women's political representation in the National Assembly is now among the highest in the region at the community and household level, however, women continue to struggle to participate on equal terms and in equal numbers. This chapter reviews how the Lao Women's Union is reaching out to women from the national to village levels, and how the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, established in 2003, takes action as the government's focal point on gender mainstreaming and equity. Specifically, chapter 3 looks at gender aspects of governance structures in Lao PDR, including the legal framework, government systems, civil society and the media. It concludes that there is a need to further level the playing field to promote women's participation and voice in the country's governance structures.

National Laws and Legal Framework

The legal framework for promoting gender equality in Lao PDR is strong.¹³⁹ As clearly stipulated in the revised Constitution of 2003 and other laws, women and men have equal rights in all spheres: political, social-cultural, and family. The 1991 Constitution of Lao PDR guarantees equal rights for women and men (Article 22 and 24). It states, "Lao citizens of both sexes shall enjoy equal rights in political, economic, cultural, social, and family affairs". Article 22 embodies the principle of equality between women and men in all the legal documents and regulations. The Constitution gives the mandate of women's advancement to the Lao Women's Union (Article 7). Women's equal rights are also stipulated in the Family, Land, and Property Laws; the Labor Law; the Electoral Law; and the Penal Law.

National Strategy for Advancement of Women

The National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (NSAW) (2011-2015) seeks to advance Lao PDR as a country "where all women enjoy equality with men, and can achieve their full potential in politics, the economy, culture, social and family life while enjoying a safe condition for living".¹⁴⁰ Its overall goals are to: increase understanding of gender equality; enable more women to join decision-making positions; provide opportunities for women and girls to access health care, education, training, employment, income generation, infrastructure, and social protection; promote wider participation of women from all ethnic groups in economic activities and social services; and strengthen gender machinery in-country, especially the NCAW.

The NSAW includes provisions for funding of the national strategy for the advancement of women by requiring that GOL issue guidance for sectors and local authorities at all levels on integrating NSAW action



Photo by The World Bank

plans into their targets, and allocating from their own budgets accordingly.¹⁴¹ The Ministry of Finance similarly is instructed to issue guidance on budget lines, allocation and expenditure for NSAW implementation. While this appears as advice to "mainstream gender", in practice it can also result in an unfunded mandate. Box 20 includes more details on the NSAW.

Box 19: National Strategy for Women Sets Targets

The NSAW aims to achieve the following goals by 2015:

GOAL 1: Awareness raising and legislation

- 60 percent of line ministries, organizations and provinces mainstream gender in their strategies
- Sex-disaggregated data is collected for database

GOAL 2: Strengthening national gender machineries

- Improved capacity of national machineries in gender

GOAL 3: Increasing women's participation in the NSEDP

- 98 percent net enrollment at primary level and 75 percent at secondary level
- 20 percent each of illiterate adults and primary school dropouts in vocational training (half of trainees to be women)
- 50 percent of tertiary enrollment should be female
- Under-five mortality reduced to 70 per 1,000 live births
- Under-one mortality rate reduced to 45 per 1,000 live births
- 90 percent of under-one children vaccinated for measles
- Maternal mortality rate decreased to 260 per 100,000 live births
- 50 percent of births attended by skilled health personnel
- 50 percent coverage rate for contraception
- 60 percent of pregnant mothers receive antenatal care
- HIV infection among general population reduced to less than 1 percent
- HIV infection among 15-24 year olds reduced to less than 5 percent
- Malaria deaths reduced to 0.2 per 100,000 population
- Tuberculosis deaths reduced to 204 per 100,000 population
- 70 percent of tuberculosis cases diagnosed and receive directly observed treatments (DOT)

GOAL 4: Increasing number of women in decision making at all levels

- 20 percent increase in number of women in decision-making from district level upwards and also in leading positions in state agencies and mass organizations
- 30 percent increase in number of women parliamentarians in the 7th Legislature
- Social sectors and enterprises where women predominate shall have female leaders
- Training for 25 percent of all female staff in political and governance theory

GOAL 5: Supporting international cooperation in gender

- Supporting training and cooperation on CEDAW.

Sources: NSAW and GOL 2011.

Governance Structures: Status of Women's Representation at the National Level

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party dominates the political process at all levels of government. According to the 1991 Constitution, Lao PDR is a multi-ethnic single-party state governed under the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. State actions are taken in line with resolutions of the Party Congress held every five years.

Party Leadership is Male-dominated

There is only one woman in the eleven-member Politburo, and only four in the central committee of 55 members (one of whom is also a member of the eleven-member Politburo, and president of the National Assembly).¹⁴² The Politburo approves all choices for senior government positions (President, Prime Minister, ministers, directors, and provincial and district governors). The Party also clears all candidates put forward for National Assembly elections.

It can be difficult for women to rise through the Party system. Government or Party promotion generally follows after special administrative, leadership competency and political training at the Party's *Tha Ngon* Administration School, or in neighboring Viet Nam, or the People's Republic of China. Advancing through this system is a challenge for women, given challenges of balancing family responsibilities with long periods of residential political training, and also because of more subtle barriers to participation present in traditionally male-dominated political networks.

The Lao Women's Union: Women's Official Voice

The Lao Women's Union (LWU)^{xxix} is mandated to represent women of all ethnic groups and to "protect women's rights and interests". It is guided by "three quality



Photo by insmai.com

targets", which include "being a good citizen, being good in development, and having a good cultural family". The LWU has representation in every village, with one member of the LWU representing women in each village council.¹⁴³ By reaching out to women from the national to the provincial, district, and village levels, the LWU serves as a bridge between the People's Revolutionary Party, the government, and Lao women from urban and rural areas. Through its extensive networks, the LWU has been able to bring women's voices into public administration — often providing the only female voice at the table. In addition to its grassroots activities, the LWU promotes and monitors the imple-

^{xxix} The LWU took root in the Lao Patriotic Women's Association, founded in 1955, which historically mobilized women to participate in the struggle for national independence. It is one of the country's four official mass organizations.

mentation of women's development programs in compliance with the Party's and government's policies, the Constitution, and laws related to ensuring equal rights between women and men. However, the LWU is often limited in its ability to represent the interests of women from more remote areas - particularly among non-Lao-Tai ethnic communities.

The LWU's key programs include projects for women focused on income generation, credit/savings, education, nutrition, and reproductive health, most of which are supported by donor agencies. The LWU conducts activities with governmental partners and also cooperates with many international NGOs. In 2011, the Lao Congress approved the next 5-year roadmap (2011-2015) of the LWU, aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of Lao women and children.¹⁴⁴

In 1997, the LWU established Gender Resource Information and Development Center (GRID). As a technical body, GRID has trained a pool of gender trainers and researchers at the central and provincial levels. It has also developed training materials and conducted research and gender analysis on various topics—which it disseminates widely, including through its five libraries and resource centers.

The National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW)

The National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) is responsible for formulating and implementing national policy for the advancement of women, as well as for mainstreaming gender in all sectors. Formally established through the Prime Minister's Decree No. 37 in 2003, it is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, supported by four deputies: the President of the Lao Women's Union, the Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, the Minister of Public Health and the Vice Minister of Education. NCAW's 16 members include all vice ministers of line ministries and mass organizations; the Vice President of the Supreme Court and the Office of the Prosecutor; and the Vice Governor of the Bank of

Lao PDR. While NCAW's direct line to the Prime Minister's office suggests potential as an important gender advocate in government, NCAW's capacity and institutional support remains limited, not least due to NCAW and sub-CAW members' poor understanding of sector-specific gender issues—which hampers effective mainstreaming in practice.

Sub-Committees for the Advancement of Women (Sub-CAW) units have been established throughout the country, and across ministries and state organizations and at provincial and capital administrative levels, creating a broad network of gender focal points. However, seniority of experience within the government was also a determining factor in the selection of the Sub-CAWs. While most male members have good decision-making authority, many lack basic gender concepts and mainstreaming skills. Their efforts are further hampered by limited resources and competing priorities within each sector. During recent years, the NCAW Secretariat and a small number of sub-CAWs have received donor support. However, this gender machinery still lacks critical capacity, resources and institutional support to deliver its mandate.

The Women's Caucus of the National Assembly

Between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of female members in the Lao National Assembly increased from 6 percent to 25 percent (i.e., 29 women members from a 115-seat National Assembly), which is impressive.¹⁴⁵ Female Assembly members formed a caucus in late 2002 and developed a gender mainstreaming strategy and action plan, as a way to further strengthen the National Assembly's capacity on gender issues. Specific activities have included: development of a resolution on gender issues in parliaments for the Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum in 2009 (hosted by the Lao National Assembly); organization of female leadership training; gender training workshops for parliamentarians; gender screening of budgets and laws, as well as oversight of their implementation; and advocacy work for the

advancement of women. The capacity and resources needed for the Women's Caucus to perform this essential gender-mainstreaming role in the National Assembly, however, still remain limited.

Decentralization and Representation

The GOL's Decentralization Policy is still being refined, but is expected to expand people's participation and improve decentralized service delivery.¹⁴⁶ Local staff will be trained to improve planning capacity at this level. With three female ministers and a fourth woman in an equivalent position^{xxx} from a total of 12 ministers, as well as three woman vice ministers, the central government has made progress on women's participation and government representation (see Table 19).¹⁴⁷ However, women are still the minority.

At the sub-national level, significant gender gaps in representation remain. At the provincial level, there are no female governors and only one female vice-governor. At the district and village levels, women's representation is also low. According to data from the Prime Minister's Office, in 2010 there were 220 female village chiefs from a total of 8,388 (3 percent of total), and 942 female deputy village chiefs out of 15,848 (6 percent of total). Three members of the 13-member Supreme Court are women.¹⁴⁸

By 2008, nearly 40 percent of the country's civil servants were women. Disproportionately few women advance to high-level positions, despite largely similar educational qualifications between most male and female civil servants. There are reported gender inequities in the civil service benefits system as well. For example, only male employees are eligible for a spouse allowance.¹⁴⁹

Table 19: Women in Political Leadership Positions

Position	Total		Women		Men	
	2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010
Ministers and equivalent	31	36	3 10%	4 11%	28 90%	32 89%
Vice Ministers	33	40	3 9%	3 8%	30 91%	37 93%
Provincial Governor	17	17	0 3%	0 0%	17 100%	17 100%
Vice Provincial Governor	34	40	1 3%	3 8%	33 97%	37 93%
District Governor	143	143	2 1%	10 7%	141 99%	133 93%
Vice District Governor	192	230	4 2%	9 4%	188 98%	221 96%
Village Head	8,726	8,608	148 2%	220 3%	8,574 98%	8,388 97%
Vice Village Head	17,128	16,790	863 5%	942 6%	16,265 95%	15,848 94%

Source: PACSA 2010

^{xxx} The President of the Lao Women's Union has a ministerial-level position.

Civil Society: New Legal Frameworks

Civil society is at an early stage of development in Lao PDR. Though a number of international NGOs have been operating in the country for several years¹⁵⁰ and some urban-based groups are emerging, locally-grounded organizations are few, and typically restricted to community service delivery. To date, there has been limited political space for independent organization. NGOs and civil society groups in Lao PDR have strong potential to contribute to women's empowerment and gender equality. Independent CSOs, given a sufficiently enabling environment, could serve the country by offering social accountability measures and conducting citizen audits in key topics, including, on gender-responsiveness of services, from local to national levels.

The government recently passed a Decree on Non-Profit Associations (NPAs), in 2009. The decree provides the first legal recognition for domestic civil society organizations. The new legal framework for NPAs recognizes the contribution of civil society organizations in development activities, particularly those targeting the most vulnerable people. It is uncertain to what degree the new Decree on NPAs will be implemented, including what kinds of groups will be allowed to register. Currently most civil society organizations work closely with the government (usually in association with one of the mass organizations or ministries), playing a complementary, but distinctive, role.¹⁵¹

A prominent group working on gender in Lao PDR is the Gender and Development Group (GDG). The GDG is an umbrella organization originally established in 1991 by the Lao Women's Union, UNICEF, and international NGOs. It has around 20 members who represent international NGOs working in Lao PDR and organizes forum meetings for coordination and exchange of lessons and experiences on gender and development activities in the country. The Group also provides gender training and consultancy services.

Media Reinforces Traditional Stereotypes

Only official state media are authorized to operate in Lao PDR and public social and political debates must be presented in terms acceptable to the state media authority. The media often reinforces the traditional and stereotypical roles of women. Reporting and news formats are traditionally very structured, although some media outlets are testing "talkback", magazine, and other formats.

The government is supporting a number of initiatives to mainstream gender concerns into the media. First, Lao National Radio Station broadcasts ethnic language programs that could be used to promote gender empowerment messages. Government policy to encourage community radio also opens up possibilities for women to participate in community-level media. The Ministry of Education and Sports and Ministry of Public Health also have their own radio programs. LWU has a specific TV broadcast on women's issues and GRID has organized a series of gender workshops for various government staff in the media sector. Several TV programs have also campaigned and disseminated information on HIV/AIDS and sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

There are, however, several obstacles to gender-responsive media. For example, limited discussion or information is made available to viewers challenging gender roles or supporting women's empowerment—for example, by informing women about their legal rights, or suggesting their potential for economic empowerment. Another obstacle to gender-responsive media is the small number of female media professionals. Traditionally in Lao PDR, journalism has been considered a male profession, unsuitable for women as it requires more independence and mobility than has been culturally acceptable. Women represent 30 percent of media staff in Lao PDR, though more than 50 percent of these are concentrated in administration, and 10 percent are in technical fields.¹⁵²

Increasingly, people in Lao PDR are exposed to media from other countries, through television, radio, and the Internet. The government is concerned about the import of foreign cultural values that conflict with traditional values such as materialism, pornography, promiscuity and gambling. However, the growing access to Thai and other international media may help young women and men challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Combating Violence Against Women

Lao PDR has no systematic reporting system for monitoring domestic violence, but a number of studies suggest prevalence rates in keeping with regional averages. A 2009 survey by GRID, though not nationally representative, shows that physical (including sexual) violence by a male intimate partner occurs in all provinces.¹⁵³ About one in five of the women surveyed reported having experienced physical violence by a domestic partner at some time in their lives, and about half of this group reported that they were currently experiencing physical domestic violence. Almost one in three reported having experienced emotional violence by a domestic partner at some time.^{xxx}

A 2003 survey found that the most commonly attributed causes of physical violence against women were that their spouse was drunk, or had money or work-related problems.¹⁵⁴ Among women who had experienced physical violence, more than half reported having had to leave their homes, though almost all later returned. In most cases, women looked for help from their family or village authority, who often advised them to return home to determine which spouse was at fault, and to try to improve family relations.



Photo by The World Bank

^{xxx} Emotionally abusive acts by a partner consisted of being insulted or being humiliated in front of others, or made to feel bad about oneself, or being intimidated or scared on purpose, or being threatened directly.



Photo by The World Bank

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006 found that nationally, 81 percent of women (aged 15-49) believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife/partner for any of the following reasons: when she goes out without telling him; when she neglects the children; when she argues with him; when she refuses sexual relations with him; and when she burns the food.¹⁵⁵

Female sex workers are particularly at risk of sexual and other forms of violence. A study by CARE found that women involved in sex work in the Vientiane area encountered a high level of violence and abuse by clients, “managers,” and authorities and—due to their illegal status—received limited or no legal protection or support.¹⁵⁶

Lao law increasingly recognizes women's rights, particularly with the 2004 adoption of the Law on Development and Protection of Women (LDPW). However, it is less obvious whether the LDPW is applied in practice or integrated into the rest of the national legal framework. For example, gaps and inconsistencies are evident in the treatment of sexual and domestic violence under the Penal Law, which takes a somewhat narrow

approach to women's rights, though penalties for domestic violence resulting in serious injury or physical damage include both fines and imprisonment.¹⁵⁷ Both LWU centers and the MOLSW, together with NGOs, assist victims of domestic violence.

Many factors affect how violence against women is defined and whether it is even considered a crime. In a 2009 survey by CARE International, pursued in cooperation with the LWU, most respondents confirmed that the initial decision on whether a case is considered criminal is made at the village level.¹⁵⁸ Most domestic violence disputes are handled either by local authorities (mainly “village mediation units”^{xxxii}) or informally within the community, where the focus is more often on maintaining family unity than on protecting women. The 2009 LWU/GRID survey found that laws and procedures related to domestic violence were poorly enforced, partly from a lack of training and understanding of domestic violence by prosecutors, police, judges, healthcare givers, and service providers.¹⁵⁹ The Lao Women's Union found that systems for monitoring and assessing the work of VMUs are weak or absent.¹⁶⁰

^{xxxii} Each village mediation unit (VMU) consists of about six members, including the head of the village and representatives from mass organizations such as Lao Women's Union, Lao Youth Union, and Lao Front for National Construction as well as from the Public Security Office. The primary purpose of the VMU is to resolve disputes and the unit has no authority to enforce laws. If the VMU deems a case of domestic violence not to be serious enough or not to be a crime, the focus would consequently be on settling the case through mediation and the two parties coming to an agreement, rather than on seeking justice or redress for the victim of domestic abuse (even in cases resulting in hospitalization).

Spousal violence has become a major cause of divorce in Lao PDR. Domestic violence was the second most common cause of divorce cases brought before the courts in 2001-02. The Family Law does not provide a no-fault divorce option, thus requiring the petitioning party seeking a divorce to prove legitimate grounds. Meanwhile the Law on Civil Procedure seeks to reconcile the parties rather than ensuring the protection of women and children in situations of domestic abuse.

Rape is criminalized by law, with punishment set at 3-5 years imprisonment, with longer sentences and/or capital punishment for victims under age 18, or in case of serious injury or death.¹⁶¹ Rape is reportedly rare, though may be under-reported. Domestic violence is illegal, though there is no law against marital rape.

Lao law does not contain specific penalties for child prostitution, but the penalty for sex with a child under age 15 (the age of consent) is 1-5 years imprisonment and fines from US\$60-360.¹⁶² The government has sought to prevent the child sex tourism industry, which prevails in other countries in the region, from taking root in Lao PDR. The government and NGOs train tourism-sector workers (including taxi drivers and tourism police) to be on the lookout for child prostitution, and introduced a hotline for reporting abuse, in addition to displaying posters on the issue in major international hotels in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.¹⁶³

Box 20: Access to Justice – A Challenge for Both Men and Women

Access to the formal legal system is limited in practice for both women and men in Lao PDR. Because the formal Lao legal system has such a short reach, quasi-judicial and customary law institutions are the means by which most people access justice, with important gender implications. Across the country, central government laws and regulations are not consistently applied or enforced. The state prefers resolving issues at the village level—a practice with significant gender implications. The practice of rewarding “case-free villages” and “cultural villages” that have not made referrals to district courts encourages the smoothing over of disputes at the village level. The majority of women's disputes are resolved at this level.

Rural women are much more likely to rely on village-based justice and on customary law. This is because they tend to be illiterate and have limited Lao language skills; are less educated on rights and legal issues; and those in rural ethnic regions are less able to travel from their villages. Knowledge about customary law is also quite limited, but the link between custom and Lao people's many ethnicities indicates that the range of customary practices is likely to be diverse, orally reproduced, and linked to traditional relationships to land, as well as to traditional gender roles. There is a question of whether village-based justice can avoid strong patriarchal gender bias and provide adequate protection for women.

Source: UNDP 2006.



Chapter 4: Emerging Areas and Risks

Lao PDR's current growth environment hosts a number of emerging opportunities and threats. As discussed in this chapter, chief opportunities and risks include potential gains from regional integration and trade; the question of migration (and its mirror image of trafficking); and growing risks from climate change. Chapter 4 begins by introducing Lao PDR's progress with regional integration. In just over 2 decades, the country has gone from being landlocked to landlinked, contributing to regional cooperatives and dialogues. Without a doubt, regional integration has assisted Lao PDR with developing its industries and trade. However, as industries developed, so have the risks that accompany them. This chapter discusses these emerging areas, while also considering risks associated with migration and trafficking and vulnerabilities related to environmental change.

Regional Integration and Trade

Since introducing the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, Lao PDR has been expanding its trade, transport, and other links with neighboring countries. In 1997, it became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The government's engagement in regional cooperation can be seen through its involvement in the GMS, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and numerous sub-regional initiatives on HIV/AIDS, migration, human trafficking, and other emerging issues, many with important gender dimensions.

Lao PDR's cross-border trade has increased substantially over the past decade.¹⁶⁴ The gendered impacts of agricultural commercialization and the expansion of trade vary, depending on household livelihood strategies, and intra-household division of labor and resource control. New cross-border markets are emerging for hand-woven textiles and other handicrafts produced mainly by women. The 7th NSEDP targets to expand handicraft markets by 15 percent from 2011-15, with 18 percent export growth.¹⁶⁵

The economic benefit that women derive from handicraft production depends on their knowledge of the market, access to inputs, relationship with traders, and control over intra-household decisions on labor and capital. Women from several ethnic groups in Lao PDR are increasingly involved in commercial weaving and embroidery, and have established relationships with buyers in Thailand and overseas. Foreign companies have also successfully exported high-value handicrafts, combining traditional weaving techniques with western designs.¹⁶⁶

More generally, however, the sector suffers from capacity constraints, lacking key human resource, capital and domestically produced raw materials.¹⁶⁷ To help combat this, the Department of Trade Promotion and Product Development, together with the World Bank, is now supporting a value chain development project in the silk textiles industry that links rural silk farmers with lead weaving firms, providing training and technical assistance.¹⁶⁸ Helping to ensure women's economic gain from such activities requires supporting their improved position in specific value chains, so that they are not



Photo by insmai.com

only account producers or wage-workers (or worse, unpaid "family help"), but instead also processors at the intermediate level, or traders at higher levels.¹⁶⁹

Emerging Industry Risks

The garment industry is a fast-growing sector in Lao PDR, with 15 percent growth expected in 2011.¹⁷⁰ Garment industry workers in Lao PDR comprise mainly women (80 percent) from rural areas (80 percent), especially from the Northern provinces.^{xxxiii} These women migrate for garment work as an alternative to difficult agricultural labor on family farms and because few other job opportunities exist in rural areas. Most are single, and are 18-25 years old. Their educational attainment levels are higher than rural averages: most have some secondary schooling. While their pay in garment factories is modest, it is steady income. Often it also provides a new, enriching experience for young rural women. Cash income earned by young women appears to improve not only their economic independence, but also their status and bargaining power in the family, and acts as an incentive to delay marriage and childbirth.

^{xxxiii} Fifty-nine percent are from the North, 26 percent from the South, and 16 percent from the Central region (UNDP and NSC 2006).

Working in the garment sector also presents particular risks for young women who are vulnerable to labor exploitation, sexual harassment, and other health and safety risks. Factory managers are mainly male, and opportunities for women's advancement have been limited to date. According to a gender assessment conducted by the World Bank on labor practices in the garment sector, rural women were attracted to employment in the sector and found it empowering, however overall, labor standards were poorly enforced with limited opportunity for third party arbitration or dispute resolution (and lack of experience among recent female migrants with such formal measures).¹⁷¹ Box 21 highlights the importance of labor standards, health and safety issues in the sector.

Migration and Trafficking

While migration statistics are not systematically collected, several studies suggest that the cross-border movement of people from Lao PDR to other countries, especially Thailand, is accelerating.¹⁷² In 2005, the Population Census estimated a cumulative net outmigration of around 150,000 people, mostly aged 20-30. Rates of internal migration are even more difficult to calculate.^{xxxv} Persistent patterns include the movement of young people for education and jobs in urban areas; significant migration from the North to the Central region, particularly to the Vientiane Capital area; and international migration from the South of the country, predominantly to Thailand. There is also a continuum of migration and more forced labor conditions, particularly in the national Lao PDR context. Economic pressures, for example, pull many rural girls into non-farm sector work, such as with beverage shops, where duties then expand into paid sex work. This example can be seen in border towns such as Boten, bordering the People's Republic of China.¹⁷³



Photo by The World Bank

Box 21: Vientiane Garment Factories in Focus

A field survey of 21 garment companies in Vientiane Capital found that 85 percent of the 9,436 workers are female. Women in these firms work mainly in the sewing section, while men dominate the cutting, washing and packing sections. Most workers live in factory dormitories, some in cramped conditions and without much privacy. Very few workers receive much formal training in the factory; most learn on-the-job, doing the simplest work first, for example, first cutting thread, then simple sewing, and later more skilled tasks for which they receive higher wages.

Safety and crowding in these workplaces range from good in large plants financed with foreign direct investment to cramped and potentially dangerous in other domestic firms.^{xxxiv} Workers are mainly paid on a piece-rate basis. Most workers interviewed said that they received extra pay for overtime work (some firms paid a premium rate per piece completed during overtime, though most paid the same rate).

Source: CNHDR 2006.

^{xxxiv} A more recent World Bank study (2012) reported the opposite in worker perceptions of labor conditions: saying that larger export-oriented factories were strictly run and included harassment, while smaller Lao-owned firms, while paying less and featuring worse physical conditions, were preferred due to the "softer" family-style management (World Bank 2011 *Lao PDR Mapping the Gender Dimensions of Trade*). This suggests a range of "modes of control" of labor and different, subjective, definitions of job quality. See also work by Guy Standing at ILO (2000). In terms of formal labor monitoring, the World Bank study found that foreign firms/suppliers used voluntary certification on labor standards and periodic auditing, but that these were insufficient to counter poor labor conditions.

^{xxxv} Census data suggests that inter-provincial and inter-district migration diminished between 1995 and 2005, but this may be explained by the increased rate of short-distance internal relocation of ethnic groups and remote villages into focal zones (Phouxay, Malmberg and Tollefsen).

Lao PDR has a long history of migration to Thailand due to that country's proximity, cultural and linguistic similarities and higher economic standing. In 2000, Thai authorities estimated almost 100,000 Lao migrant workers in Thailand. With this said, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and Thai research institutes estimated there are at least 300,000 Lao Workers in Thailand - a figure three-times higher than official estimates. Only a fraction are formally registered migrant workers. While accurate data are difficult to obtain since most migrants move through informal channels, the overwhelming majority of migrants to Thailand seem to be young people aged 15 to 25 from border areas. Available reports indicate that male migrants end up in agriculture work, factory work, and fishing boats in Thailand, while female migrants in domestic work, services, and entertainment industry.

Female migrants are generally less educated and younger than male migrants. The average age for male migrants is just below 21, while it is 16.5 for women. Fourteen percent of males are reportedly under 16 years old, while females equate to approximately 63 percent of the migrating population under the same age. This puts female migrants at greater risk of labor and sexual exploitation.¹⁷⁴ Most women stop migrating at marriage or around age 26, while men continue to migrate until around age 30, and sometimes migrate even after marriage.

Female migrants are vulnerable to such abuses as restrictions on freedom of movement and communication. These restrictions include being locked in factories or houses and not allowed to use the telephone; being forced to work for long hours without rest periods; physical abuse; dangerous working conditions; and deductions and withholding of salary. Female migrants working in household as domestic or personal help have experienced some of the most extreme cases of abuse and mistreatment. Due to their irregular status, they are unable to negotiate or report abuses to the authorities for fear of arrest and deportation.¹⁷⁵

Human trafficking has been defined as the non-consensual movement of people for the purpose of exploiting their labor.¹⁷⁶ While there is general agreement that trafficking differs from migration in that it includes the element of coercion, in practice it is not always easy to distinguish the point at which a migrant becomes a victim of trafficking. Given this, a general approach taken by the governments, donor agencies, and NGOs has been to target migrants and migrants-to-be for human trafficking prevention and safe migration awareness programs while making the migration channels more secure and regular. With the accelerating regional integration, non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups in remote rural areas are increasingly becoming vulnerable, which requires

an urgent attention.¹⁷⁷ It is also of growing concern that due to the impacts of People's Republic of China's one-child policy on the availability of women of reproductive age in rural People's Republic of China, as well as the significant increase of Chinese migrant workers in Northern Lao PDR, women (particularly from the Akha ethnic group) are being sold as brides to the People's Republic of China.¹⁷⁸

All forms of trafficking are prohibited under Penal Code Article 134, which also prescribes harsh penalties for persons convicted of human trafficking. As well, the Law on the Development and Protection of Women, Article 24, proscribes the trafficking of women and children. Lao PDR remains engaged through the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) in combating trafficking regionally. However, the GOL has not yet ratified the Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers.

There is ongoing debate over the prevalence of trafficking in Lao PDR. The MOLSW reported that of 1,447 trafficked victims formally repatriated from Thailand from 2001-2009, 96 percent were girls, and 85 percent were 18 years old or less. There is also a regional dimension to the problem: 76 percent of victims were from the three Southern provinces of Savannakhet, Champassaak, and Saravan. However, given the clandestine nature of trafficking, caution should be made on making and using estimates of the number of people trafficked and their socioeconomic profiles. More recent work, such as UNIAP's human trafficking sentinel surveillance in border areas, is providing valuable data, which should be used as a basis for anti-trafficking programming and project designs.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MOLSW) is participating in a project on Trafficking in Women and Children in the Mekong Sub-region. The aim of this project is to collect information on causes of girls and women being trafficked regionally and to propose sub-regional measures to combat this trafficking. A database containing information on cross-border trafficking has been established in Lao PDR. In the later stages of the project, an inter-ministerial working group will provide concrete recommendations on how to combat trafficking in women and children. Awareness-raising activities on the issue at the community level will also be conducted as part of the project.



Photo by insmai.com

Climate Change

As a low-income country with an agriculture-based economy, Lao PDR is highly vulnerable to climate change.¹⁷⁹ Women can play key roles in climate change and natural disaster mitigation and adaptation. The 7th NSEDP has estimated a 1.1 percent negative impact on GDP from climate change.¹⁸⁰ This would stem from increasing drought and flood risk; and changes in ecosystems and decreased crop production, from a temperature rise of 1-2 degrees Celsius.¹⁸¹

Flooding in August 2008 affected nearly 204,000 people, damaged an estimated 50,000 hectares of arable land, and caused overall losses of more than US\$9 million. Over the period 2000-2007, the country saw more than 1 million people affected by floods, and 97,000 by drought, with damages adding up to US\$8 million and US\$84,251.¹⁸² Adaptation to climate variability and climate change depends on such factors as wealth, levels of infrastructure resources and technology, and social capital and access to information, all of which are mediated by gender dynamics in the household, economy and society.¹⁸³

Women's roles in climate change mitigation and adaptation have been insufficiently recognized and supported. In Lao PDR, as in most developing countries, women have the major responsibility for household water supply and energy for cooking and heating, and for producing the family's food,¹⁸⁴ yet their voices are often excluded from local and national decision-making processes about how to manage risks from natural disaster and climate change, with their gender-specific needs often overlooked.¹⁸⁵

Women's particular needs and challenges have not been a significant consideration in past disaster responses in Lao PDR, including the recent Post-Disaster Needs Assessment for Cyclone Ketsana (2009). The 2009 Lao Na-

tional Adaptation Program of Action (NAPA) does not explicitly address gender challenges or gender opportunities in relation to climate change, nor does the GOL 2010 Climate Change Strategy. The NAPA includes a list of 45 adaptation priority projects in water resources, forestry, agriculture, and public health, but lacks specific analysis, strategy, or proposed interventions for addressing gender issues.

Lao women's traditional responsibilities in the household and community as stewards of natural resources position them well to contribute to strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities. For example, women can be supported to switch to clean fuels for household consumption (benefiting both family health and the environment) and also maintain their traditional roles in the protection of biodiversity, particularly in fragile upland areas and in national protected areas.

Box 22: Working Together Towards Climate Change Adaptation

The country's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) works closely with the National Disaster Management Committee and the line ministries, which are part of the National Steering Committee on Climate Change (NSCCC), established in 2008 to mainstream climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction and management into strategy and policy. There are proposals to extend the Committee's membership to mass organizations, including the Lao Women's Union, and enhance communication with CSOs and the general public. As is the case elsewhere, special efforts will need to be made to ensure women's voices and preferences are heard during adaptation planning processes. In the area of climate change mitigation, participation including processes such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), women's interests must be represented directly. MoNRE just started a new project *Harnessing Climate Change Mitigation Initiatives to Benefit Women* to scale up women's participation in SNV-assisted Improved Cook Stove National Program and its value chain.

Sources: ADB 2008b, World Bank 2011h and World Bank 2010b.

Conclusions: National Challenges and Opportunities

This assessment has shown that in tandem with economic growth and development, gains have been made in promoting gender equality, in endowments, economic opportunity and agency. The country's increased integration with its neighbors has resulted in more opportunities for women and men alike. But at the same time, economic integration is also increasing risks, in particular for vulnerable groups, who are accustomed to a traditional way of life. The assessment has illustrated that special measures are needed to help women take advantage of the opportunities economic growth brings. Special efforts are also needed to bring development to women from ethnic groups and to listen to and act on their specific needs.

Lao PDR is at a critical juncture to harness the power of its economic growth to improve its human development outcomes and ensure that all segments of society can benefit from its natural resource endowment. To achieve these goals, it will be necessary to place gender equality and women's empowerment at the center of national development plans.

Moving into the 7th National Socio-economic Development Plan (NSED) period (2011-2015), Lao PDR has prioritized agricultural development and modernization, continued advances in electrification, education and health services coverage, sub-national development and integration across regions of the country, and across rural-urban divides, national forest management, as well as support to emerging sectors such as tourism and garment sector development. All of these offer opportunities for women, provided that gender and ethnic specificities of opportunities, constraints and vulnerabilities are routinely assessed as part of national and local planning, and service support, across sectors. With such measures in place, Lao PDR can expect to reap the growth and poverty reduction benefits of full integration of its girls and boys and women and men in the economy, society and natural environment.



Photo by The World Bank



Photo by Junshien

Recommendations

Public policy and action are required on a number of fronts to consolidate gender gains and close gender gaps in Lao PDR.

Endowments

Promoting gender equality in human development endowments remains a priority in Lao PDR, particularly for those areas where gender gaps in education remain large, and health outcomes are poor. Closing gaps in human development, where they persist, is likely to yield high returns for the country.

Recommendation 1.1: Increase coverage and quality of health services, with a focus on remote areas and among ethnic groups, particularly in areas of maternal health, sexual and reproductive health and nutrition, and with attention to demand-side issues, and the role of men in maternal health-seeking behavior.

Maternal mortality rate (MMR) and infant mortality rate (IMR), while decreasing, are still very high. There is a need to accelerate expanding and improving quality of maternal health services and building demand for modern health care, particularly in remote rural areas. This would allow all women of reproductive age to have access to antenatal care, skilled birth attendants,

post-partum follow-up, and emergency obstetric and neonatal care, and for them to understand the benefits of using these services. This is required to meet the 7th NSEDP targets as MMR of 250 per 100,000 live births, and IMR under age 1 of 45 per 1,000 live births. Such efforts will also contribute to the 7th NSEDP's target of reaching 50 percent of households with primary health-care coverage, as an interim goal to the main goal of universal primary healthcare coverage. Outreach and attention to health communication, combined with a strong focus on the demand side of health care, is needed in order to encourage women and their male partners to seek care.

Encouraging girls to upper secondary and higher education also plays an important role in discouraging early marriage and managing the total fertility rates. Outreach activities in rural remote areas and non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, training local women as birth attendants and health volunteers is proving effective in reducing cultural and language barriers and can be replicated further.

Sexual and reproductive health services and information coverage also needs to be expanded in Lao PDR. This includes provision of information on contraception and family planning, and prevention and treatment of sexually-transmitted diseases (including HIV). Design of such services needs to take into account the evolving sexual behaviors of young men and young women in both rural and urban areas. This requires use of a variety of information dissemination venues, such as high

school curriculum, rural and urban health outposts and private clinics, and a range of providers from public to private and NGO sectors, including those working with target populations such as sex workers, in order to meet 7th NSEDP targets of 80 percent of sex workers having access to HIV prevention services. To outreach young women and men of non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups in remote areas, innovative use of media (e.g., radio, TV or DVD soap opera) and content development based on ethnographic and cultural research, such as those done by ADB and UNESCO for the Khmu¹⁸⁶ can be considered.

Finally, tackling malnutrition rates in Lao PDR still requires significant efforts in the form of dissemination of improved nutritional knowledge and practices, particularly among women. Given women's central role in household food security as well as the impact of their individual nutritional status on overall family wellbeing, women should be the target of these efforts. This should include taking steps in health extension services to counter pregnancy-related food taboos and improve women's overall nutritional knowledge and practices, and to work closely with women in remote communities to provide them with the tools to practice good nutrition. This will improve women's health and that of children, and future workers, in order to meet 7th NSEDP targets on nutrition.

Recommendation 1.2: Improve access to education, through investments in rural schools and educational services, to reduce gender gaps, regional disparities, and gender stereotypes in secondary and tertiary education, vocational training, and adult female literacy.

While Lao PDR has made great strides in reducing gender gaps in primary education, disparities still remain at higher levels, and especially in more remote rural areas and among non-Lao-Tai groups. This requires investments in a greater number of new schools, and expansions of existing grades in existing schools, particularly in under-served rural areas and among non-Lao-Tai dominated regions. Second, there is a need to provide incentives (including scholarships) and facilities (including safe female student accommodation) to

encourage female attendance and reduce the dropout rates of girls (particularly those from disadvantaged geographic areas and ethnic groups) and encourage girls' successful transition into, and completion of, secondary education. This will require attention to remedial classes in reading, writing and math to enable improved learning outcomes for ethnic students, particularly ethnic girls. This should be undertaken in the context of an overall drive to improve the coverage and quality of educational provision, with due regard for the sanitation, health, and safety requirements of both girls and boys.

It will be important to provide incentives to encourage female attendance and reduce the dropout rates of girls from rural regions and disadvantaged ethnic groups at all levels while meeting national targets of 95 percent enrollment of children aged 6-10. Similarly, donor-supported education projects need to ensure gender and ethnic disadvantages are considered in project design. Finally, as in health, demand-side issues in education require attention through use of outreach to ethnic communities and parents (including via parent-teacher groups) to more widely promote ethnic girls' sustained enrollment and promotion to higher grades. In addition, increased attention to growing the number of female teachers in Lao PDR (especially those from ethnic minorities), and their role in education management and governance, can help improve gender outcomes for students in the country, by providing female role models for girl students, and likely by also improving the educational experience for girls in schools, through reduced bias against female students in the classroom. Their improved teaching quality is also essential and needs to be supported by increased access to teacher training and better teaching curriculum and teacher dormitory facilities.

Female adult illiteracy is still present in the country, hence renewed efforts are needed to combat this illiteracy, possibly in the context of other local development efforts (e.g. in health or agriculture). Provision and implementation of such courses need to be sensitive to the multiple demands on women's time, and to provide child care where feasible to encourage attendance of mothers with young children. These efforts would contribute to the 7th NSEDP target of 99 percent literacy among youth aged 15-24.

In addition to formal education, opportunities for training and vocational education (TVET) in both traditional and non-traditional sectors can be provided to women, in order to build a skilled labor force. Courses can combine classroom and on-the-job training, with job placement. Both vocational training and formal education should be aimed at helping female workers gain technical and managerial skills demanded by the labor market to counter their segregation into lower paying jobs and less remunerative sectors. Innovative public-private partnerships are important between the government regulatory bodies, public and private training institutes and the private sector employers. New schemes such as wage subsidies to the employers providing job placement for women in non-traditional jobs need close monitoring.

These efforts are to ensure women's equal participation in the 7th NSEDP goal of increasing industrial/construction/mining share of workforce to 7 percent and services share to 23 percent; as well as the goal of women participating in the paid workforce at the rate of 40 percent of total workers. It is also necessary to monitor the share of the 18 percent educational budget increase going to TVET; and to monitor progress against the 7th NSEDP target of 20 percent female participation in training courses in technology, agricultural production, processing, handicrafts and services.

Recommendation 1.3: Increase access to, and women's participation in, clean water and sanitation, especially in rural areas, while ensuring women's voice is reflected in design and maintenance.

Investments in water and sanitation are required in order to meet the 7th NSEDP targets for 80 percent household coverage in access to clean water and 60 percent access to sanitation, especially in the under-served rural areas. These should include participation by women in project management and user management committees.

Inadequate sanitation facilities in schools (especially lack of separate facilities for boys and girls) have the effect of inhibiting girls' participation in formal education, especially at secondary level. Investment in school sanitation facilities should thus be a priority area of focus. Public sanitation facilities in venues typically frequented by women (such as public markets and health centers) can also help improve women's quality of life. Individual household sanitation facilities are costly, when compared to, for example, condominal services offered at community level. Regardless of the level of service provided, projects should aim to ensure that female-headed households and poor households in general are not disadvantaged by project requirements for households and communities to contribute cash or labor towards improved sanitation facilities and local water supply infrastructure. Innovative outreach mechanisms can also be scaled-up, such as the Community-led Total Sanitation Initiative, in order to reach the 7th NSEDP sanitation target of 60 percent of total population covered by improved sanitation.

All investments in water and sanitation should include gender-related targets and indicators for monitoring improvements in the sector. Implementation of the gender strategy or gender action plan both at the Ministry and the provincial water utilities (Nam Papa) levels requires close monitoring. Ongoing innovations such as scholarships to female high school students on water engineering should continue and their replication explored.

Economic Opportunities

Women's effective participation in the economic sphere still lags behind men in Lao PDR. Hence it is necessary, on both equity and efficiency grounds, to take active measures to close gaps in economic opportunity.

Recommendation 2.1: Pursue a labor-intensive growth strategy that expands wage labor opportunities for both women and men, especially in such emerging industries as tourism, garments' textiles, and food processing and beverages.

As Lao PDR's economy begins to diversify away from the primary sector (agricultural production) to more value-added sectors, it will be important to monitor the effective participation of women, especially younger women, in new and expanding service and manufacturing industries, including tourism, garments/ textiles, and food processing and beverages, at all levels of employment, and as a key driver for women's economic empowerment and reduction of gender inequalities in access to resources. Employers need to be educated on how to make their workplace more gender responsive.

Third party monitoring can be supported to ensure that women are not being segregated at low levels within specific industries without opportunity for advancement. Working women can also be supported through provision of appropriate childcare, e.g., in the form of community or workplace crèches. Regular sex-disaggregated monitoring and analysis of impacts of trade, particularly in the agriculture, handicraft, and garment sectors, should also be undertaken including through joint research partnerships with regional or international academia.

Tourism is an important emerging sector in Lao PDR, generating US\$400 million in export earnings, providing 20,000 direct jobs, and helping to distribute economic gains in formerly lagging regions. However, women have not yet fully reaped the gains from this sector. The 7th NSEDP has a goal of 2.8 million tourists by 2015. In order to ensure gender-equitable outcomes from tourism, a number of measures are required. First, gender and ethnic balance should be promoted in seats made available in vocational and technical tourism training programs. Second, common standards and guidelines for responsible, gender- and ethnically-sensitive ecotourism and village tourism should be established, and periodic awareness programs on STD/HIV/AIDS and trafficking risks provided to tourism operators, workers and officials. The GOL may also wish to consider use of labor standards trademarks in the tourism industry which affirm that operators are not using child or trafficked labor – as has been done in neighboring Cambodia under the Childsafe trademark.

GOL is focusing in rural areas on area development strategies. Throughout the processes, efforts will be required to ensure that gender-sensitive support is pro-

vided to aid in the transition of rural livelihoods, with particular attention to the needs of different ethnic groups and with due regard for their cultural practices and historical links to the land. Where populations have been resettled as part of *kumban* area development strategies, special efforts will be required to ensure appropriate agricultural skills and market linkages that are place-specific are transferred to women as well as men. Agricultural commercialization offers another opportunity for women's advancement, provided they are supported with access to information and inputs, to take advantage of opportunities across the agricultural value chain.

Finally, while ensuring women's access to new employment opportunities driven by globalization is important, it is also important to increase the number of young women who pursue skilled or technical areas, such as machine operators in construction, furniture making and automotive and mechanical repair. These types of jobs have constant local market demand and are far less vulnerable to the changes in global and regional economy. Technical and vocational training, as well as social marketing campaigns to change the gender stereotypes of jobs (both by employers and women themselves), are necessary. Activities focusing on job placement and career counseling, such as the WB-AUSAID STEPs supported program, could be scaled-up.

Recommendation 2.2: Expand women's access to and control over inputs for farm and non-farm enterprises, including finance, land, agricultural extension, and business training.

Great strides have been made in securing land title for women in Lao PDR. It is important to maintain this momentum by increasing women's awareness of and access to land rights and other national resources (compensation for resettlement, securing access to communal lands, forests, and use of REDD+ mechanisms under climate mitigation programs) in order to help strengthen women's asset base. Such efforts will contribute to the 7th NSEDP target of 1 million land titles, and also to support the strong progress made in women's titling under World Bank-supported projects Land Titling Projects 1 and 2 (LTP1 and LTP2).

Targeted support to women-owners of medium and small enterprises is also needed, in the form of training in marketing and finance, business development and improved access to financial services, and reduced barriers for women to register. Such services are often best delivered in bundled form to female entrepreneurs in sectors where women predominate. These initiatives are already included in the National SME Development Plan: 2011-2015. Rigorous implementation of this will help contribute to the 7th NSEDP goal of expanding activity of rural enterprises. Also, improved women's group organizing around product marketing through agricultural cooperatives to meet 7th NSEDP agricultural targets can be considered. In particular, women's skills in meeting sanitary and phyto-sanitary standards of food processing can be improved so that they can compete in the agriculture and food processing sectors.

National targets for expanded electricity coverage need to facilitate access of the poorest households, especially female-headed households, to electricity, by ensuring that cost recovery measures do not unduly exclude such households, and by monitoring overall geographic coverage to close gaps in electrification across regions. Recent innovations in the use of gender analysis in transport operations can be applied in Lao PDR. These include the need to ensure that: i.) gender analysis is undertaken and incorporated in the design and evaluation of all major transport infrastructure projects; ii.) women are represented in village road maintenance committees; and iii.) necessary steps are taken to mitigate negative social impacts on women, particularly those related to HIV/AIDs and trafficking. In general, the use of community driven development approaches to improve access to services and that put women at the center of the community decision making process – such as the approach used by the Poverty Reduction Fund – could be scaled-up.

Recommendation 2.3: Improve gender mainstreaming in infrastructure investments, by expanding electricity access for poor and female-headed households, expanding rural roads access, and improving benefit-sharing and women's participation in design and implementation of hydropower, and mining operations.

National targets for expanded electricity coverage need to facilitate access of the poorest households, especially female-headed households, to electricity, by ensuring that cost recovery measures do not unduly exclude such households. This target should also monitor overall geographic coverage to close gaps in electrification across regions. In the transport sector, rural access, particularly farm-to-market access should remain a priority, as they directly contribute to reducing the transport drudgery of people in remote areas, particularly women. For all roads and transport investments, the following needs to be ensured: i.) gender analysis is undertaken and incorporated in the design and evaluation of all major transport infrastructure projects; ii.) women are represented in village road maintenance committees and, where possible, have access to paid jobs in construction and maintenance; and iii.) necessary steps are taken to mitigate negative social impacts on women, particularly those related to HIV/AIDs and trafficking. The P2P-project has piloted innovative ways to improve women's access to electricity, which should be scaled-up.

Similarly in hydropower and mining, gender impacts should be identified in economic and social impact assessments for hydro and mining investments. Gender considerations should also feature in benefit-sharing arrangements. Further, the sector should promote equal employment opportunities for women and men at all levels of industry, as well as women's participation in mechanisms established for benefit sharing, community investments, and mitigation of negative social impacts from infrastructure investments.

Agency

Third, taking measures to strengthen women's voice and influence, and to protect them from violence, is also needed. Such measures will contribute to the quality of decision-making, and to development more broadly.

Recommendation 3.1: Improve capacity and institutional support for the gender mainstreaming machinery in Lao PDR, by retaining use of designated gender focal points at every level of government in each sector and including women's continued representation.

Lao PDR has strong and effective gender machinery, including the Lao Women's Union and NCAW and Sub-CAWs, from local to national levels to address gender issues and represent women's needs and interests. This should be retained, their capacity strengthened and budgets allocated so that their mandate of gender equality in Lao PDR can be fulfilled. Specifically, improved capacity for gender analysis and gender equality results monitoring and reporting in sectoral ministries is needed in order to ensure improved gender monitoring and NSEDP program plan design. Sub-CAW members in sectoral ministries often lack technical gender expertise and require further assistance. Gender budgeting approaches should be supported in order to ensure gender mainstreaming in the planning stage and track public spending aimed at closing gender gaps in the country.

Recommendation 3.2: Support progress in women's representation in national and local government, by monitoring 7th NSEDP goals of 15 percent of leading posts (above district mayor level) to be held by women; and 30 percent of National Assembly members to be female.

In terms of political representation, significant efforts will be needed to ensure that progress made in women's representation within the National Assembly filters across and down to all levels and branches of government. In addition to government representation, women's participation in local decision-making bodies such as water user committees, farmer associations, road maintenance committees, and resettlement committees should be encouraged and systematically track the percentage of female representation. Particularly, the appointment of more women in the lower levels of government, including as village chiefs, district- and vice-district governors, and provincial governors needs to be supported. The LWU memberships and its strata should continue to be utilized to ensure women's representation in the government and party structure, as well as to motivate women to be in higher government positions.

Recommendation 3.3: Reduce incidence of violence against women through legal reform efforts, as well as efforts to increase public awareness, and capacity of health, law enforcement and protection services staff.

Violence against women remains a persistent challenge in Lao PDR, and one which cuts across all classes and ethnicities. Measures are required to address this challenge in the form of broad policy, advocacy efforts, and programs to challenge perceptions and attitudes to domestic violence and to increase awareness of women's legal rights to protection and redress. Specific capacity-building is needed of service providers in the health, law enforcement and judiciary and village mediation units, in order to address the multiple dimensions of violence against women, through training and an enhanced coordination system. Increased support to protection services by qualified personnel is also needed in order to better respond to the victims of gender-based violence and their families.

A gender review of village mediation units may also be in order so that an assessment of any gender differences in access to justice in this, and related, areas is undertaken. Finally, inconsistencies in the law with regard to violence against women must be addressed, particularly those between the Penal Law and the Law on Development and Protection of Women, and their application. Per CEDAW Committee recommendations, legal statutes should abolish the explicit exclusion of marital rape and adopt a wider definition of rape in the Penal Law to include any non-consensual sexual relations, to reflect the realities of violence and abuse in the country.

Emerging Areas and Risks

Fourth, there is a critical role for public policy in fostering new opportunities and managing emerging risks associated with increasing economic integration, migration, urbanization, and climate change.

Recommendation 4.1: Through regional fora, such as the GMS Working Group on Human Resources Development, and the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT), support regional policy dialogue on enhancing women's human capital base to capture the opportunities of, and minimize risks from, regional integration.

Key areas of intervention under the GMS Working Group on Human Resources Development include attention to skill development (especially in tourism), cross-border migration, and minimizing negative impacts of human mobility such as HIV/AIDS and human trafficking particularly borne by ethnic groups and women. The Forum represents a great opportunity for regional learning and joint governance. There is an increasing opportunity for the GMS Working Group on Human Resources Development to work with other GMS sector working groups such as transport, environment, and tourism. Signed by all 6 GMS countries in 2004, COMMIT has grown into an effective regional cooperation mechanism in enhancing formulation and implementation of anti-trafficking policies and programs at the regional and national levels. It now implements the 3rd Sub-Regional Plan of Action 2011-13. The government should continue to play an important role in these regional fora.

Recommendation 4.2: Improve outcomes for vulnerable migrant populations through legal reform, improved services, and strengthened anti-trafficking mechanisms.

Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse, and trafficked persons even more so. To reduce the incidence of abuse and undertake redress for victims, the following can be considered: i.) accede to the Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers; ii.) increase access to information, services, and protection against exploitation of both regular and irregular migrants such as hotline, improved source-destination, NGO collaboration, and improved coordination with Thai authorities; iii.) consider opening a transit center in Savannakhet for victims repatriated from Thailand; iv.) regulate labor recruitment agencies tasked with processing work permits and contracts; and iv.) further strengthen national and regional anti-trafficking mechanisms, while avoiding stigmatization of victims in supporting reintegration of returnees.¹⁸⁷

Recommendation 4.3: Mainstream gender considerations into climate change and disaster planning, and ensure that women participate in consultation and decision-making at local, regional and national levels.

Climate change represents an emerging threat to poverty reduction goals and national stability. Vulnerable groups are made even worse off by climate variability, and women are no exception, especially in areas where resource-based livelihoods predominate. There is a need to ensure that: i.) gender is mainstreamed into national strategies and programs for climate change and natural disaster management; ii.) women participate in consultation and decision-making mechanisms for adaptation planning and emergency management at national, regional and local levels; iii.) adaptation planning includes a strong focus on social protection measures for those affected and/or displaced by climate-related events; and iv.) use of productive safety nets (such as watershed management and public works development) is considered as a means of building area and household resilience to climate change *ex ante*.

Gender sensitive social protections should be considered for rural households in the form of, for example, index-based livestock or weather insurance for crops. The poverty and social impact effects of such interventions should also be conducted. Intra-household data collection and analysis to understand gender-specific impacts of vulnerability and shocks could be conducted. Social protection outlays will likely need to increase due to climate stresses. In this scenario, countries can consider use of contingency financing arrangements to guard against fiscal shocks to national budget from program outlays (including expanded social protection) responding to climate-induced weather events.

Gender Mainstreaming

Finally, efforts to secure gender equality in Lao PDR will require continued and strengthened attention to not only sector-specific outcomes, but also to overall system approaches including: i.) use of sex-disaggregated indicators and targets; ii.) capacity-building among government agencies and ministries; iii.) gender analysis that takes into account regional and ethnic divides; and iv.) enhanced attention to emerging male gender issues.

Recommendation 5.1: Use sex-disaggregated indicators and targets in planning, implementation and monitoring, and strengthen capacity among GOL sectoral ministries in this area.

While performance is improving in this area, enhanced attention to use of sex-disaggregated data and analysis, and the capacity of GOL ministries and NSAW agencies to undertake this work, would aid in ensuring that Lao PDR reaches the 7th NSEDP target of 19 percent poverty reduction, and equitable development among women and ethnic groups. Collection and use of sex-disaggregated data through national sample surveys should be increased, especially to understand the gender-specific impacts of vulnerability and shocks. Effective monitoring and evaluation of gender impacts of national programs and priorities is required. Gender budgeting is another approach, which has worked well in other countries, and could be considered in the Lao context.

Recommendation 5.2: Analyze gender trends with consideration to existing rural/urban, regional and ethnic disparities in the country.

Even where sex-disaggregated data is collected, there is limited capacity in both NSAW agencies and the sectoral ministries in analyzing the meaning of such data. Poverty trends and access to health and education services are strongly determined by geographic location in Lao PDR, with remote rural areas dominated by non-Lao-Tai groups at a particular disadvantage. For this reason, it is important to ensure that trends in gender equality are monitored with particular attention to any existing regional disparities, so that targeted measures, including in social protection, can be taken as necessary to improve gender outcomes in all regions of the country.

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