

Indigenous Peoples



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Catching up slowly: ethnic and gender inequalities in Lao PDR

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In addition to the majority Lao-Tai (67 percent of the population), the 5 million residents of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) include three major non-Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic groups: the Mon-Khmer (21 percent), the Hmong-Lu Mien (8 percent), and the Chine-Tibetan (3 percent). These categories further include 49 distinct ethnicities and 200 ethnic subgroups. Despite a clear narrowing of disparities in literacy and schooling among all groups, non-Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic minority groups are disadvantaged in many respects relative to the Lao-Tai majority.

While one in four Lao-Tai lives in poverty, one in two non-Lao-Tai does. Non-Lao-Tai live predominantly in isolated rural highland areas with limited access to transport infrastructure, marketing opportunities, and social services. Nationally, one-fifth of non-Lao-Tai live in villages with electricity compared with about 60 percent of Lao-Tai. Some non-Lao-Tai minority groups are still semi-nomadic, moving to new areas when their lands are depleted, but others have become sedentary. Like rural Lao-Tai households, rural non-Lao-Tai households are primarily farmers, but they cultivate mainly less productive lands in harsher upland areas and rely much more on forest products for income.

Non-Lao-Tai adults have fewer years of formal schooling than the Lao-Tai, and their children

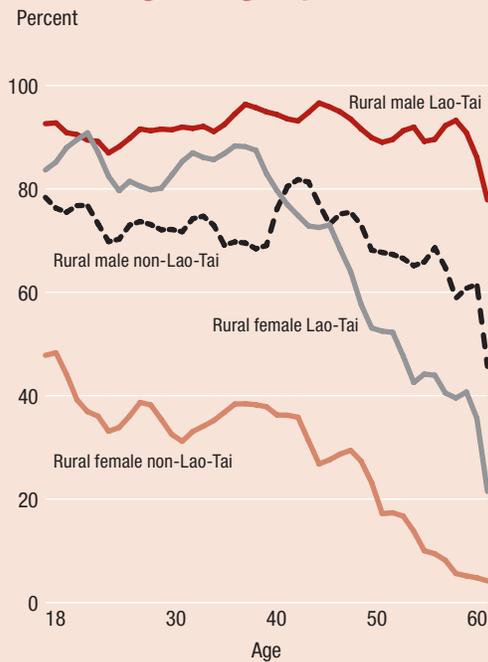
are less likely to attend school, partly because they have less access to schools, especially ones with adequate instruction. Non-Lao-Tai are less likely to live in villages with primary and lower secondary schools than Lao-Tai are. And non-Lao-Tai women receive significantly less education than non-Lao-Tai men or Lao-Tai of both sexes do (figure 1). For example, 34 percent of rural non-Lao-Tai girls had never attended school in 2002–03 compared with 6 percent of Lao-Tai girls.

Non-Lao-Tai access to health services is also limited. Only 7 percent of the non-Lao-Tai population lives in villages that have a health post. In rural areas Lao-Tai adults are about 10 percent more likely to seek treatment when ill than non-Lao-Tai. Women in both groups are less likely to seek medical treatment than men.

There are further disparities among non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, with some groups considerably worse off than others. For example, 56 percent of rural Mon-Khmer boys and 53 percent of girls ages 6–10 were enrolled in primary school in 2002–03, but only 36 of rural Chine-Tibetan boys and 30 percent of girls. Those who live in rural areas are typically more disadvantaged, although there are some deep pockets of urban poverty as well (figure 2). Disparities are even more marked between genders. Non-Lao-Tai adult women and girls lag behind non-Lao-Tai men in many ways, including schooling, health,

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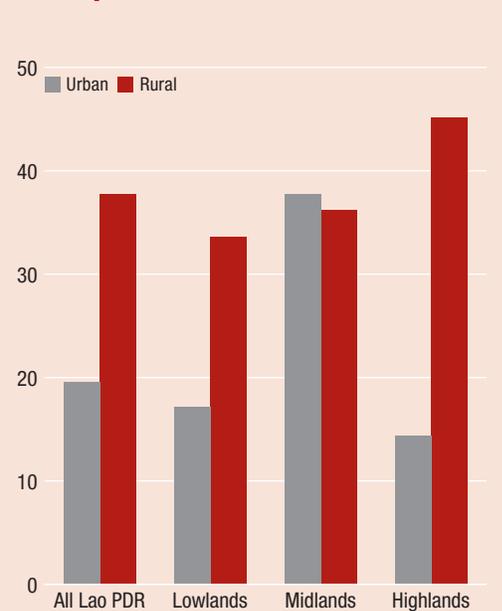
FIGURE 1
Literacy rates by age, gender, and ethno-linguistic group, 2002–03



Note: Data are three-year moving averages. Because the number of observations declines as age increases due to mortality, data are plotted only through age 60.

Source: Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 2002.

FIGURE 2
Percent of population who are poor, by geographical location and by rural and urban residence



Note: The figure uses a poverty headcount measure defined in Richter, Kaspar, et al. 2005. “Lao PDR Poverty Trends 1992/3–2002/3, Draft Report,” World Bank, Washington, D.C.

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and leisure hours. Policies to redress inequalities and raise living standards for all must take into account this gender difference.

Existing government policies focus on providing access to basic services, land tenure, and agriculture—and these policies have yielded improvements. However, some of these policies require that highland non-Lao-Tai households abandon their villages and environments and resettle in lowland “focal” areas where it is easier to supply public services and they can engage in more productive paddy wet-rice cultivation. These relocation policies are also promoted as ways to safeguard forest environments by ending swidden agriculture. Observers have criticized the underlying assumptions and results of these policies. The relocation areas are typically already occupied by Lao-Tai who have made claims on much of the productive land and resent

the incoming non-Lao-Tai. Although the official policy is that of voluntary resettlement, non-Lao-Tai households have had trouble adapting their livelihoods to the new environments and also face health problems, such as malaria, that were not common in the highlands, and thus need more support services.

For these reasons, policies that are tailored to different groups’ specific needs and capabilities are likely to be the most successful in raising welfare levels broadly. Policies must address the multiple sources of disadvantage, such as ethno-linguistic affiliation and gender, to ensure that future generations of non-Lao-Tai have better human capital. Such policies will reduce existing disparities and high poverty levels. Newer survey data from 2008/09 already indicate that overall poverty has declined from 25 percent to 18 percent, and for the non-Lao-Tai population, from about 50 percent to 42 percent.