

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the product of a joint collaboration between the Gender Resource Information and Development (GRID) Center of the Lao Women's Union and the World Bank. The Lao PDR Gender Profile involved a review of existing literature on gender issues in Lao PDR and accompanying group discussions that covered several important issues including education, health, and agriculture, among others. A number of *observations* emerge from the report:

### 1. Social, Political, Economic and Cultural Context:

- Lao PDR is a heavily rural country endowed with natural resources. Most of the population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture for its livelihood and income.
- Lao PDR is also one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with an official 49 ethnicities that fall under four broad language families: the Lao-Tai, the Mon Khmer, the Hmong-Mien and the Chine-Tibet. Such a large pool of ethnic groups brings with it a plethora of cultures, underscoring the importance of culture in the analysis of gender roles and relations.
- Access to roads, markets, schools and health facilities is limited in rural areas. Only about 14 percent of roads are paved, with access becoming more difficult during the wet season. This situation especially affects those living in remote rural villages, many of whom are non-Lao speaking ethnic groups.
- Since the mid-1980s, Lao PDR has been transitioning from a centrally planned to a market-oriented system. Efforts are also being made to promote industrialization and modernization, and create links with regional and international economies.
- Family and social relationships are very important across all Lao cultures. These relationships have a strong impact on the position and attitudes of men and women, and the family shapes social attitudes and traditions, which are passed down from generation to generation

### 2. The Enabling Environment for Gender Equality:

- Promoting gender equality is an important national goal, as reflected in the national Constitution and in the framework of the national machinery for the advancement of Lao Women.
- The enabling environment for gender equality in Lao PDR consists of laws, international conventions, policies, and institutions that favour and promote the enhancement of women's status.
- The Lao Constitution and various laws guarantee gender equality, there are two main governmental organizations whose responsibility it is to engender policies and programs, and the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) – the government's national development plan – highlights gender as a cross-cutting priority.

- The level of legal awareness among Lao PDR men and women remains low, particularly concerning laws that affect women. The implementation of laws remains weak especially at the district and provincial level, and the capacity within ministries to follow-through on policies needs strengthening, particularly in light of persisting and increasing vulnerabilities such as trafficking and violence against women.
- The Lao Women's Union safeguards the rights and interests of Lao women and children of different ethnic groups while the recently established National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) is assisting the Government to formulate national policy guidance and strategic action plans to promote women's advancement and gender equality.

### 3. Gender, agriculture and rural resources:

- Agriculture employs about 80 percent of the total workforce of 2.4 million people, with women making up more than half of workers at 54 percent. Unfortunately, due to the low level of gender awareness in society their role is often neither visible nor valued.
- Lao women play a critical role in agriculture and the use of natural resources, and are primarily responsible for maintaining their families' food security.
- Men are described as the heads of the households representing their families at all official meetings to discuss village development activities. Because many women – especially in ethnic minority villages – are illiterate, they are unable to adequately participate in village development activities.
- Men and women spend similar amounts of time on agricultural work, but men spend more hours on income generating activities (including agricultural work).
- In Lao PDR access to roads and other infrastructure is closely related to geographic location, with the greatest access being in urban areas.

### 4. Economic Participation

- Lao women's economic participation is one of the highest in the region.
- In addition to their work in farms and within the household, women are involved in informal small-scale income earning activities and handicrafts production to supplement their family incomes.
- The informal sector absorbs the great majority of Lao women, who tend to own small businesses mainly in retail and textiles.
- The Lack of education and limited economic opportunities and access to resources pushes women into the informal sector and small-scale enterprises.
- Women have limited mobility, and traditional customs do not allow women to work far from the village.
- Women entrepreneurs face difficulties dealing with cumbersome registration procedures, in part due to their low level of education and limited time.
- More women than men work in the formal sector, although women tend to be found in low-skilled jobs, rarely in management positions.

- Migration is becoming an option for many Lao men and women, one which is associated with increasing vulnerabilities particularly for women and children.

## 5. Education

- Although Lao PDR has made quantitative and qualitative progress in education over the past several decades, education indicators remain among the lowest in East Asia.
- There are stark disparities between urban and rural areas, boys and girls, rich and poor. Within urban areas, the gender gap in education has practically closed. Meanwhile, rural areas record some of the lowest educational indicators in the country, and the gender gap continues to widen.
- The most disadvantaged and cut off from services are those living in remote villages, many of whom are ethnic groups. Indeed, a significant proportion of children – especially girls and ethnic groups in remote areas – are out of school.
- There are more illiterate Lao women than men. Causes of female illiteracy vary across provinces and among the different ethnic groups, but poverty, distance, costs, and traditional beliefs tend to be the main factors. Other factors include the burden of household chores, early marriage or pregnancy.
- About 35 percent of students enroll in secondary education but only about 5 percent complete the full six years. Vocational training opportunities are limited, and less than 5 percent of Lao children go to university.
- Many poor families do not see the relevance of formal education for improving their livelihoods, and the lack of interest by parents discourages children from attending school. Linguistic barriers and cultural attitudes towards education also perpetuate low human development and the vicious cycle of poverty that many ethnic minority groups find themselves in.

## 6. Health

- Traditional gender roles give women the responsibility for the health care of the household, including ensuring the immunization of children.
- Culture and tradition play an important role in choice of health practices, such as location of child birth, use of birth attendants and sterilization practices.
- While maternal mortality rates have decreased, they remain among the highest in the region, with the national average of 530 masking wide disparities between rural and urban areas.
- Delivery in the home is a very common occurrence but is of particular concern for poor, rural women because they lack the basic sanitary conditions needed for safe delivery.
- The country's geography in great part defines access to health facilities, with access decreasing dramatically as one moves outside urban areas. The gap also widens between rural and hard-to-reach rural areas.
- Since ethnic groups tend to be concentrated in remote areas, they are mainly the ones cut off from services. In rural areas in particular, the quality of health care provided is often not very high, which can affect the demand for health services.

- Women are often forced to walk long distances to seek medical help and supplies because of the dearth of health centers, and the lack of roads and transport. The difficulty in reaching a health care site was cited as a reason why many women do not seek treatment.

## 7. Special Vulnerabilities

- Along with the rapid changes that Lao PDR has been undergoing, a number of vulnerabilities have arisen, many of which are increasingly being seen as affecting women.
- Greater economic integration and development have brought with it a greater desire for migration to neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand. Associated with migration are a number of risks including sexual exploitation, HIV/AIDS, violence, and falling prey to trafficking networks.
- The issue of violence against women is also one that is increasingly emerging into the open. New research has shown that many women suffer from abuse particularly within the household, but few have legal or psychological recourse.
- The burden of opium abuse is very trying on women, particularly poor ethnic minorities who have to deal with household members that are opium-addicts, further adding on their already heavy workload burden.

## 8. Women's Role in Decision-making

- At 23 percent, Lao PDR is the second highest proportions of women in lower houses of parliaments (the National Assembly) in the region. However, women remain under-represented in provincial and district authorities, and village level committees are almost entirely male.
- Within ministries and agencies, few women appear in senior level positions with no women ministers, only two women at the vice-ministerial level, and a handful of women in the judiciary.
- The situation within the provinces is no better, with only one woman governor in the whole country.
- Prevailing cultural values tend to disadvantage women in terms of their participation in politics and decision-making processes.