

Lao PDR Gender Profile

**Gender Resource Information
& Development Center (GRID)**

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
CPI	Committee for Planning and Investment
DOF	Department of Forestry
FOMACOP	Forest Management and Conservation Project
GOL	Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic
GRID	Gender Resource Information & Development Center
ILO	International Labor Organization
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
LECS	Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey
LFNC	Lao Front for National Construction
LWU	Lao Women's Union
LYO	Lao Youth Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MOC	Ministry of Commerce
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
NSEDP	National Socio-economic Development Plan
NSC	National Statistics Center
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Products
PAFES	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PMO	Prime Ministerial Order
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RRA	Rapid Rural Assessment
SFM	Sustainable Forestry Management
SUFORD	Sustainable Forestry and Rural Development Project
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
STEA	Science, Technology and Environment Agency
THB	Thai baht
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VFA	Village Forest Association
VFC	Village Forestry Committee
VRF	Village Revolving Fund
WB	World Bank

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PREFACE

This Gender Profile was developed by the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID), a capacity building project of the Lao Women's Union with support and assistance from the World Bank. Data was collected from secondary sources as well as interviews and field visits to Government ministries and institutions, international organizations and individuals. Earlier drafts of the Profile were shared with stakeholders for their comments and inputs.

The Gender Profile aims at: (1) facilitating the implementation of the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) by providing sex-disaggregated data and information for planning gender sensitive programs; (2) providing a baseline document for Government ministries and institutions, donor community and international organizations in their work aimed at reducing poverty and promoting gender equality and empowerment; and (3) enabling a better understanding of the roles and status of men and women in the Lao PDR in the development process, consequently leading to policies and programs that address gender imbalances or disparities.

The Lao PDR is highly committed to the promotion of equality between men and women, and has articulated the country goals and priorities in the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES). The NGPES' gender strategy – aimed at reducing poverty – is founded on the important role played by Lao women in the society. The effective participation of women, especially poor and ethnic minority women, is essential for the country to achieve the goals of reducing poverty and improving living standards. To this end, the current national framework consisting of -- *the Constitution (Articles 22 and 24)*, *various laws such as the Law on Women Development and Protection (2003)*, and *institutions such as the LWU and the Lao Commission for the Advancement of Women (LaoNCAW)* – provide an excellent enabling environment for achieving gender equality in the country. In addition, Lao PDR has also ratified various international Conventions including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 1981), and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). The Government is also committed to implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which goals include gender equality and women's advancement.

The LWU's main task is to protect women and children's rights and interests. It promotes and monitors the implementation of women development programs consistent with the the Constitution and the laws of the country, and Party and Government policies, and monitors the implementation of equal rights between women and men. The main responsibility of LaoNCAW is to ensure equal access to resources and basic services of all people regardless of gender, socio-economic status, ethnic and educational backgrounds. Under the direction of LaoNCAW, all Government ministries are expected to develop strategies and action plans to promote gender equality at all levels. In this regard, sex-disaggregated data contained in this Gender Profile is a useful resource for ministries to plan and develop programs and projects that ensure equal participation and

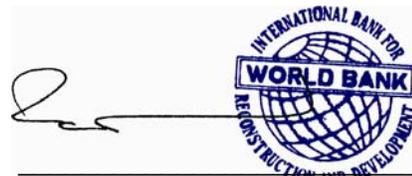
benefit both men and women. The Lao mass organizations – Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), Lao Revolutionary Youth Union (LRYU), Lao Federation of Trade Union (LTU) and LWU – which are responsible for uniting all Lao people of different ethnic backgrounds regardless of their gender, race and ethnic and religious backgrounds, will also find the Gender Profile very useful in their work.

Line ministries have begun to mainstream gender concerns by establishing high-level gender working groups, collecting sex-disaggregated data relevant to poverty reduction and other national goals, using the data to develop a gender profile or assessment of the sector, developing a gender strategy and action plan, identifying issues or problems related to women's participation in the sector and actions to redress them. They are also providing gender training and capacity-building to their staff, improving the gender and ethnic balance of staff at all levels, screening all new policies, programs and projects from a gender perspective and consulting local women in the design of new projects for poverty reduction, and ensuring that they participate in project activities, including extension services and training. Guidelines have been developed for a National Gender Action Plan to integrate the gender strategies and action plans of ministries, agencies and mass organizations.

The Lao Women's Union and the World Bank are committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. With the support and cooperation of government institutions, international organizations and donor agencies, gender equality will continue to advance, improving both the quality of economic growth and poverty reduction efforts, and living standards of all Lao men and women of all ethnic groups in the Lao PDR.



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GENDER CONCEPTS & DEFINITIONS

Gender refers to the differences between women and men within the same household and between cultures that are socially and culturally constructed and that change over time. These differences are reflected in: roles, responsibilities, access to resources and basic services, constraints, opportunities, needs, perceptions, views, etc. held by both women and men (Moser 1993).

Gender versus Sex. Gender is created by society (socially constructed), while sex pertains to the natural/biological and physical differences between women and men. It is sex that determines that women should become pregnant and bear children, but it is gender relations that make sure that it is women that take care of the children, which is something that men can also do. While child-bearing is biological, child-rearing (taking care of children) is socially ascribed.

Gender equality pertains to equality of opportunity, including equality of rewards for work done, equality in access to productive resources (social and economic), to basic facilities such as medical and health care, education and employment. It also implies equal opportunity to participate, make decisions, influence and contribute to the development process (World Bank, 2001)

The **Gender and Development Approach** (GAD) identifies and analyzes women and men's position in society, accessibility to and control over resources such as land, employment, credit, livestock, income and capital; and access to and levels of participation in the social, economic, and political spheres. The GAD approach contributes to understanding the situation of women and men by ensuring that development planning takes into consideration their needs and interests. The approach challenges the unequal gender relations that exist between women and men.

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.

Chapter 1: Social, Political, Economic and Cultural Context

1.1. Overview

Known as ‘the land of a Million Elephants’ (*Lane Xang* in the Lao language), Lao PDR is a heavily rural country endowed with vast natural resources. Landlocked, it shares borders with China to the north, Myanmar to the northwest, Thailand to the west, Cambodia to the south, and Vietnam to the east. One of its great features is the Mekong River, which flows from the north to the south for almost 1,900 kilometers. With an area spread out over 236,800 square kilometers, 70 percent of its land is mountainous and hilly.

Box 1: Lao PDR General Facts

GEOGRAPHY	
Land area ^{b/}	236,800 sq. Km. (91,430 sq. mi.)
Capital City ^{b/}	Vientiane, (2005 pop. 695,473)
Other principal towns	Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, Pakse, Thakhek
Terrain	Rugged mountains, plateaus, alluvial plains
Climate	Tropical; rainy season (May to Oct); dry season (Nov to Apr)
Administrative subdivisions ^{b/}	18 Provinces (16 provinces; one special zone, Vientiane Capital), 141 Districts, and 10,552 Villages (2005)
POPULATION	
Population (2005) ^{b/}	5.6 million (50.2% female)
Population density ^{b/}	23.7 persons/Km ²
Population growth rate (2005) ^{b/}	2.1 %
Ethnic groups ^{c/}	Lao-Tai (66.7%); Mon-Khmer (20.6%); Hmong-lu Mien (8.4%); Chine-Tibet (3.3%); others (1%)
Religions	Principally Buddhism
Language	Lao (Official), various dialects
Literacy Rate (2004) ^{a/}	
Aged 15 years and above	61% Female, 77% Male,
Aged 15 – 24 years	75% Female, 83% Male
Life expectancy (2004) ^{a/}	57 years for women, 54 years for men
Infant mortality rate (2004) ^{a/}	65/1,000 live births
Fertility rate (2004) ^{a/}	4.6/woman
Female headed-Households (2005 ^{b/})	10% of the households
Work force ^{b/}	Agriculture-80%; industry and services-20%
ECONOMY	
GDP (Economy) in 2004 ^{b/}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture (46.6%): <i>Primary products</i> - glutinous rice, coffee, corn, sugarcane, vegetables, tobacco, ginger, water buffalo, pigs, cattle, poultry, sweet potatoes, cotton, tea, and peanuts • Industry (27%): garment manufacturing, electricity production, gypsum and tin mining, wood and wood processing, cement manufacturing, agricultural processing. • Services (25.5%); and Import duties (0.9%)
GDP (2004) ^{b/}	\$2.4 billion
Per capita income (2004) ^b	\$390

GDP growth rate (2004) ^{b/}	6.9%
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Sources: ^{a/} World Bank GenderStats, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/home.asp>

^{b/} NSC, 2005,

^{c/} LECS 3,

A heavily rural country endowed with natural resources and inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups, three quarters of Lao's population of 5.6 million lives in rural areas where access to markets, schools and health facilities is limited. 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 who have limited economic, educational, and other opportunities.

1.2. Historical Context

A brief review of the history of the Lao PDR contributes to an understanding of the diversity of ethnicity and ethnic relations in the country

Ancient to Modern History- Lao PDR's history indicates that the earliest inhabitants, predating the arrival of the Lao-Tai, were from the Mon-Khmer ethnic group (Chamberlain et al, 1995a and 1995b). The Mon-Khmer have been present in the Southeast Asian mainland for at least 5,000 years. Lao-Tai groups began migrating into northern Lao PDR in the ninth century. The Lao King Fa Ngum created the Kingdom of Lane Xang in 1353.

From the 18th century A.D. onwards, the country was repeatedly threatened – even invaded – by outside powers. Lao PDR's independence and freedom were defended and regained through internal unity and drawing from the heroic traditions of its ancestors. From 1930 onwards, under the leadership of the former Indochinese Communist Party and the present Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the multi-ethnic Lao people waged a struggle in their fight against colonialism, neocolonialism and feudalism. In December of 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic was established, heralding the country's independence and sovereignty.

1986 New Economic Mechanism- A gradual return to private enterprise was formalized in the adoption of the *New Economic Mechanism* (NEM) in 1986. Since then, Lao PDR has been transitioning from a centrally planned to a market-oriented system. While the economy has been liberalized, politically the country remains socialist. The Lao PDR's economy is multi-sectoral, having as objectives the expansion of productive capacity, the growth of business and services in order to transform the country from a subsistence into a commodities economy, the promotion of industrialization and modernization, and having links with regional and international economy with the aim to grow and stabilize the national economy and to improve the material and spiritual living conditions of the country's multi-ethnic peoples.

1997 Regional Integration- In 1997, the Lao PDR was admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and subsequently joined the ASEAN Free Trade

Agreement (AFTA). As part of its AFTA membership, Lao PDR has agreed to gradual tariff cuts, and tariff levels are meant to come in line with the rest of the ASEAN countries by 2008. The country is also participating in other regional mechanisms like the Mekong River Commission, thus further linking its future with the wider region.

1.3 Political Context

Government and Party structure

Governed under the leadership of the Lao People Revolutionary Party, the Lao PDR places the country's multi-ethnic peoples at heart of the political system. The National Assembly is the legislative authority that represents the people. The election of members of the National Assembly is carried out through universal, equal and direct suffrage, and through secret ballot.

The first Lao Constitution that was adopted in 1991 granted the Government the power to manage and execute state duties in the political, economic, social and cultural sectors, in national defense and security, and in foreign affairs. The Government is the executive organ of the state and manages in a unified manner the execution of state duties in all areas: political, economic, cultural, social, national defense, security, and foreign affairs. The Government consists of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers and Chairperson of the ministry-equivalent committees.

The Lao PDR has 18 provincial leaders that are assigned by the President to each of the provinces. The political system also comprises district governors that are appointed by the Prime Minister. Village chiefs are elected by villagers from selected candidates at the village level. Their duty is to implement Government laws and directives, maintain security and improve social-economic conditions.

Functioning under the Party, there are four mass organizations that are responsible for uniting all the people of different ethnic backgrounds regardless of their sex, race and religion to contribute to the cause of defense and development. The four mass organizations are the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), the Lao Revolutionary Youth Union (LRYU), Lao Women's Union (LWU) and the Lao Federation of Trade Union (LFTU).

1.4. Cultural Context

Lao PDR is characterized by tremendous ethnic and cultural diversity

Lao PDR is 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.¹ From a purely anthropological perspective, research has found that there are as many as 230 ethno-linguistic groups, based primarily on linguistic differences (Chamberlain et al, 1996). Certain ethnic groups predominate in

¹ This categorization is based on the 2000 census.

certain provinces and geographic settings, many of which are remote and mountainous, reflecting the importance of human geographic distribution in the Lao context. The dominant Lao-Tai family has traditionally lived in lowland areas, the Mon-Khmer and Hmong-lu Mien in midland areas, and the Chine-Tibet in highland areas.

Table 1: Lao PDR ethno-linguistic families

Ethno-linguistic Family	Percentage of Total Population (%)
Lao-Tai	66.7
Mon-Khmer	20.6
Hmong-lu Mien	8.4
Chine-Tibet	3.3
Others	1
Total	100

Source: LECS 3

Such a large pool of ethnic groups brings with it a wide variety of cultures, underscoring the importance of culture in the analysis of gender roles and relations. This vast array of cultural perceptions between ethnic groups is well documented in the 2001 Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), which stresses the relevance of culture in poverty analysis. Even seemingly basic elements of societal organization such as the days of the week may vary radically within a small geographical radius (ADB, 2001). For example, the Man ethnic group (Hmong-lu Mien) in Pak Nam Tong, Oudomxay, has a 6-day week, whereas the Khmou Lue (Mon Khmer) village of Pang Sa, only 3 km away, has a 10-day week (ADB 2001). Half of the villages studied in the PPA were found to live according to a 10-day week, and for the Khmou Am (Mon Khmer) group for example, the 1st and 8th days are non-working days. The Lao in Vientiane use a Western solar calendar, but also simultaneously refer to the lunar calendar, by which Buddhist holy days are calculated.

Another example of differing time concepts are the different new years celebrated among different ethnic groups. The Hmong, the Khmou (Mon-Khmer), and the Akha Chi Pya (Chine-Tibet) celebrate their new year towards the end of November or the beginning of December (depending on the beginning of the first lunar month). The Lao new year falls around the middle of April (the Lao 6th month) just prior to the monsoon rains, while for the Yao (Hmong-lu Mien), the Lahu Shi (Chine-Tibet), the Tai Dam (Lao-Tai) and many other groups, the new year is around the end of February, coinciding with the Chinese new year and Tet in Vietnam. For many Mon Khmer groups the New Year is the beginning of the new swidden clearing or the harvest of the old. For some other groups, there is no calendar, with time being recognized through the sounds of the forest, the voices of cicadas, birdsongs, muntjac calls, and so forth.

Ethnic and cultural differences impact gender roles and concerns

This wealth of cultures, traditions and perceptions influences which is regarded as acceptable behavior, activities, and relations with others, directly impacting gender roles and relations (RTI, 2000). Since within ethnic minority groups these values may differ from those of the majority the Lao-Tai, concepts of gender roles and relations correspondingly differ. For example, within the matriarchal Lao-Tai group, land is passed on to the daughter while this is not the case within the minority ethnic groups. Similarly, lowland women from among the Lao Tai majority group tend to control household finances, while men have that responsibility within the various ethnic minority groups. Ethnically-based cultural differences also create gender-specific patterns with regard to utilization of social services (such as education and health), and in the real and perceived utility and opportunity costs of the services offered.

The importance of family and marriage transcends cultural differences in Lao society

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. Although the variety and number of rituals and traditions across Lao culture is enormous, marriage customs are at the core of social relations for the majority of ethnic groups in Lao PDR. Marriage is considered a core value within society, there is tremendous weight placed on Lao women to marry and remain married, no matter the circumstances. This is confirmed by the Lao saying, “A woman without a husband is like a ring without a stone; there is nothing of worth in it.” In this regard, marriage customs and patterns – which have a socio-economic impact on both women and men – are very important for understanding the status of men and women in Lao society.

Bride price is still practiced widely in the Lao PDR

As in many other Asian societies, there is a system involving presents during marriage ceremonies in Lao PDR. Traditionally, either the families of the groom and the bride present gifts to each other or one side gives more (in value) to the other. This tradition has meaning in itself - the value of the receiver attributed by the donor. The custom of bride price, in which the family of the groom gives money and gifts to the family of the bride, is still a common practice in Lao PDR. This custom is the opposite of the dowry, where the bride’s family gives gifts and money to the groom and his family. According to one survey, about 85 percent of the brides’ families receive bride price upon marriage, although there are variations among the different ethnic groups (GRID, 2000). Many of the 15 percent of families who did not receive bride price were among those who married during the war when there were no means to apply the custom.

Residence patterns after marriage depend on ethnic groups

In the Lao PDR, residence after marriage can follow three main patterns – matrilocal, patrilocal, or bilocal – with most of the majority Lao Tai group practicing the matrilocal – type pattern. Other groups practice either patrilocal or bi-local patterns. Generally-speaking, the matrilocal system, where the husband moves in with the wife’s family,

affords women higher status and decision-making power. Status is conferred on the woman from the fact that the house and property belong to her family and through familiarity with her surroundings. If there are problems in the marriage, it is the husband who has to leave. The daughter who lives with and takes care of the aged parents inherits or receives property from the parents; mainly the house and the land (traditionally homestead land and paddy field). Only if the family is wealthy and has many pieces of land do the remaining siblings inherit any. In either case, in the matrilineal system the daughters get more property than the sons.

Divorce remains a stigma

Divorce is socially frowned upon in Lao culture; Lao law recognizes divorce but does not grant economic security to either party in the form of continuous alimony, except for child support (see Chapter 2). One study found that among the Khmou Lue (Mon Khmer) in Phoutong village, Oudomxay Province, three terms describe conditions that are not regarded favorably (World Bank 2004). One is “mahang” meaning divorcee, another is “yong poy” meaning widower, and a third is “mapoy” meaning widow. The last two apply to people who are still young, i.e. whose husbands or wives died young. These are considered punishments meted out by the spirits for some kind of wrongdoing by the individuals. While they are not exactly social outcasts, they are looked down upon by other members of the village (World Bank 2004).

1.5. Poverty and Economics

The Lao economy continues to grow and GDP has been rising

The Lao economy is predominantly based on subsistence agriculture. The annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was US\$390 in 2004 and the share of agriculture in GDP was 46.6 percent, with the remaining 27 percent coming from industry and handicrafts, the service sector (25.5 percent), and import duties (0.9 percent). Eighty-five percent of the total labor force is employed in agriculture (World Bank, 2005). Lao PDR’s main products are rice, tobacco, coffee, tin mining and timber. The country is also rich in forest and water resources, which have great potential for the country’s development.

With the aim of stimulating economic growth and alleviating poverty. Lao PDR carried out an economic restructuring policy between 1986 and 1987 in order to promote a free market economy, develop its private sector, and reduce poverty. With that in mind, in 1986 the Government adopted its New Economic Mechanism (NEM) with the purpose of transforming its centrally planned economy to a market driven one. This prompted a number of initiatives that included price liberalization, removal of subsidies, alignment of the exchange rate with the market rate and the establishment of private and foreign commercial initiatives, and increased regional integration.

With the NEM, Lao PDR initiated reforms in economic, physical and social infrastructure, particularly in transport and communications. These reforms led to GDP

growth of 6.7 percent (1991-1996), with the major contributors being the agricultural and forestry sectors, the expansion in the export of lumber and wood products, garments, the assembling of motorcycles and electric power as well as the inflow of foreign capital, including Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

Since then, GDP has been on the rise, with the exception of 1998 due to the onset of the Asian financial crisis. During the crisis, Government revenue declined and the country experienced a deficit. However, a number of stability measures were introduced including improvements in tax collection and monetary controls to reduce inflation and improve the exchange rate. Other stabilization measures included the reduction of public expenditure on social services such as health, education and infrastructure from 17 to 11 percent. These measures severely affected many households, including women and children.

Poverty continues to fall but disparities in living standards remain

As the Lao economy has continued to grow, poverty – as measured by poverty headcount – has declined from 46 percent in 1992-3 to 39 percent in 1997-8 to 33 percent in 2002-3. In particular, poverty has dropped significantly – from 56 percent to 51 percent to 40 percent for the above-mentioned years– in districts characterized as steep and mountainous. Since these are areas with large numbers of ethnic minority groups, it could suggest that poverty has decreased for ethnic minority groups, on average. However, while poverty may be on the decline, there continues to be a significant gap in living standards between ethnic minorities and the majority group, the Lao-Tai, with the latter having a 25 percent poverty headcount compared to 53 percent for the Mon-Khmer, 47 percent for the Hmong-Iu Mien, and 40 percent for the Chine-Tibet (NSC *et al*, 2006). Among other things, these disparities are reflected in consumption, education, and health levels as well as access to infrastructure and services.

Poverty in the Lao context

In Lao PDR, crop cultivation and rearing of livestock are considered to be the main sources of most peoples' livelihoods and well-being, and agricultural income is considered by the vast majority of villages as the most important source of their community's income.² Therefore, poverty in the Lao context usually means a bad crop or the shortage or lack of rice and livestock. Secondary causes of poverty include lack of or limited arable land and water, crop pests, livestock diseases, sickness and poor health. Other causes involve the lack of or limited number of roads and accessibility to remote and mountainous areas, lack of or limited safe drinking water and poor sanitation, diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, and lack of or limited health and education facilities.

Poverty is more pronounced among the rural population and ethnic minorities, especially women. Data for 2002-2003 show that the highest levels of poverty are in Saravane Province in the South with more than 54 percent of the people living below the poverty line, followed by Huaphanh (North), Phongsaly (North), and Savannakhet (Center), with

² 2002/3 LECS village questionnaire

over 43 percent of the people living below the country poverty line (average income=\$1 per day) (LECS 3). Moreover, it is estimated that 28percent of the Lao population was undernourished in 1997-99, i.e. did not meet its daily energy requirements (FAO 2001). The population in the North is susceptible to food seasonal food shortages and more exposed to cyclic food insecurity due to floods.

Poverty is more pronounced among ethnic minorities in Lao PDR, particularly women

As seen in Table 2, patterns of poverty in Lao PDR are reflected in the various ethnic groupings. Of the four main ethno-linguistic groups, the Mon-Khmer is the poorest, with more than half of this group living under province-based poverty lines. This is in contrast to the majority Lao-Tai group, which – at 25 percent – has the lowest incidence of poverty. These figures reflect the importance of human geographic distribution in the Lao context; the further populations live from urban settlements, the lower is their access to basic infrastructure, services, incomes and livelihoods options. For instance, the Mon-Khmer households earn the lowest amounts of cash wages, which may contribute to the high incidence of poverty within this group.

Since certain ethnic groups predominate in certain provinces and geographic settings, many of which are remote and mountainous, they tend to have the least physical access to public-financed resources. Within this context, women tend to experience poverty differently, with women working longer hours because they are primarily responsible for their households' food security. This is a responsibility that is especially difficult for highland families that have relocated to lowland areas, in response to government policies to reduce shifting cultivation. If families cannot grow sufficient rice in their new location, they may return to their old shifting cultivation fields, which could be a considerable distance away.

Table 2: Ethnic Group Poverty Patterns in Lao PDR, 2002/3

	% of National Population	Incidence of Poverty Headcount Index (% of pop.)
Total Lao PDR	100.0	
By Geographic Area		
Urban	23.0	19.7
Rural	77.0	37.6
With all-season road		31.4
Without all-season road		46.2
By Ethnic Group		
Lao-Tai	66.6	25.0
Mon-Khmer	20.6	54.3
Hmong-lu Mien	8.4	40.3
Chine-Tibet	3.3	45.8

Source: World Bank 2005 based on LECS3

Cultural rituals affect the production patterns of many Lao

According to the 2001 PPA, livelihood systems in Lao PDR consist of cultural beliefs (ritual technology), land (territory), rice cultivation, livestock, corn, tuber and vegetable crops, and natural resources (fish, wildlife and other forest products) (NSC 2001). Because rituals, feasts and ceremonies are part and parcel of their daily lives, cultural

rituals affect the production patterns of many Lao. For the majority of those who live in rural and remote areas, “rice and livestock have souls and when the ‘balance between human and spirits is upset, misfortunes and poverty come in” (ADB/NSC 2002). People compete against each other for higher ritual status. Many believe that poverty in Lao PDR is ‘new’ and brought on by external factors beyond their control (i.e. bad weather, floods, livestock diseases, poorly implemented development programs, lack of extension services and technical skills, etc) (ADB/NSC, 2002). There are no cases of death from severe hunger, but there are many cases of chronic malnutrition among children, especially in poor areas.

Future trends offer opportunities as well as some greater risks

Major challenges facing Lao PDR over the coming years pertain to rapid growth and development, industrialization and trade. All of these changes will bring about new opportunities as well as new vulnerabilities for the Lao people. For instance, increases in manufacturing and services may offer more jobs for women in formal sector, but these may be accompanied by new vulnerabilities such as poor working conditions. Regional integration will increase the flow of migration and remittances, but it may also heighten the risk of trafficking. Market-oriented agriculture may alter livelihoods and land use patterns, changing gender roles and deeply-rooted cultural patterns and traditions. The challenge for Lao PDR is to go through these changes while ensuring the proper balance between opportunities and risks. And in this regard, gender awareness and sensitivity are critical to achieving equity and equality in the context of old traditions and new opportunities.

Chapter 2

The Enabling Environment for Gender Equality: Legal, Institutional, & Policy Framework

2.1. Overview

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.

Despite these efforts and achievements, 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. Efforts to heighten awareness and assist women are being made by institutions such as the Lao Women's Union and the Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women, but more is needed.

2.2. Legal Framework

The Lao constitution and various laws guarantee gender equality

Lao Constitution

- The 1991 Constitution of Lao PDR – the highest law in the country – guarantees equal rights for women and men (Article 22 and 24). It states that '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).

Family, Land and Property Laws

- Under the Lao Family Law of November 1990, 'men and women have equal rights in all aspects pertaining to family relations' (Article 2). Article 9 states that "*Men and women have the right to marry starting at the age of eighteen. In special and necessary cases, this limit may be lowered to less than eighteen years of age but no less than fifteen years of age. Marriage must be based on mutual consent and will from both sides without coercion from any side or individual.*"
- Under the country's divorce law, either the husband or wife may seek a divorce, although women in certain circumstances are protected, presumably to prevent

- abandonment by their husbands. Article 22 (Family Law 1990) prevents a man from seeking divorce during his wife's pregnancy, or when a newly born child is under the age of one. Alimony, which may not exceed a one year period, may be paid and/or received by either husband or wife.
- Under article 26, initial assets pertain to property owned by the husband or wife before marriage; or acquired through inheritance; or bequeathed or bestowed specifically to either the husband or the wife after marriage and existing in their original form or transformed into other assets. Acquired assets pertain to property acquired jointly by the married couple during their married life except for low value assets of personal use.
 - Lao's inheritance law is gender-neutral. In contradiction with the customary land inheritance system, it endorses the same inheritance rights for women and men, girls and boys. The customary land inheritance system varies between ethnic groups and is related to traditional residence patterns after marriage – matrilineal, patrilineal or bi-local. The Lao-Tai, who comprises over 60 percent of the population, mainly practice matrilineal inheritance where land (homestead land and/or rice fields) is inherited by daughters from their parents. Among the Chinese-Tibet and Mon Khmer groups, who comprise 3 and 21 percent of the population respectively, land and other assets are mostly transferred to the sons.
 - In Lao PDR, land is owned by the State but all citizens have equal rights to use the land. Land and property laws state categorically that “property that is acquired before marriage received through inheritance, or granted specifically to a particular spouse is not considered as conjugal property.” “Land acquired by a couple is supposed to be issued a joint land use certificate or title” (Law on Land, Article 43; Family Law; and Property Law.)
 - *“Land registration is the record in the land register book, such as: names and surnames of the husband and wife who have received the land use right, land category, land boundaries and area, acquisition manner and land location are recorded in the land register book.”* (Article 43, Law on Land).

Labor Law

- Under the Lao Labor Law (1994), “An employer shall not employ women to perform heavy-duty work that is dangerous to their health as specified by regulation, nor to work during the night in all industrial sectors from 10.00 to 05.00 hours the next morning. Rest periods for women shall be 11 hours before resuming work on the next day” (Chapter 5, Article 33). Article 54 on retirement pension stipulates different retirement ages, 60 years for men and 55 for women.

Electoral Law

- According to the Constitution, all Lao citizens over the age of 18 have the right to vote. Those over 21 years of age have the right to be elected to the National Assembly, regardless of their gender, ethnic group, social status and profession. In practice, more than 90 percent of all voters vote (men and women) in elections.

Law on Women's Development and Protection

- In 2004, the National Assembly adopted a bill to protect women's rights and interests and to ensure equality between women and men. The law on Women's Development and Protection defines principles, rules and measures relating to the development and protection of women so as to promote their knowledge and capabilities; to promote gender equality; to combat trafficking in persons, women and children; to combat domestic violence; to uphold women's status in society; and to encourage women to participate in national defense and development (Article 1). The Law also provides provisions for the management and monitoring of women's development and the protection of their rights and interests.

Penal Law

- Rape is considered a serious crime and the Penal Law (1992) has several articles concerning the punishment of a person who attempts to or rapes a woman. The level of punishment is related to the case:
 - Any individual making use of force, threats of arms, soporific substances, drugs or the methods resulting in the stage of helplessness of a woman who is not his wife to undertake acts of rape against her will, is punishable of three to five years of imprisonment (Article 119).
 - If a female less than 15 years of age has been gang-raped or forcibly raped, if there has been damage made to the body of the victim at the time of the rape, if the victim is disabled for the rest of her life, the perpetrator shall be imprisoned from 7 to 15 years.
 - If a female has been forcefully raped and killed, the perpetrator shall be imprisoned from 15 to 20, or for life, or receive capital punishment.
 - "Any person who engages in sexual relations with a male or female child less than 15 years of age shall be punished by imprisonment from 1 to 5 years." (Article 120)

International Conventions

The Lao PDR is a signatory to a number of international Conventions, which the country is committed to implementing. It acceded to the Convention on the Political Rights of

Women in 1969, and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1981 and 1990, respectively. CEDAW prohibits women's discrimination and protects their rights and CRC obligates Governments to protect the rights of children – girls and boys – and to ensure that their basic needs are met. Safe motherhood is also part of the CRC (Articles 22 and 24). The Government's commitment to gender equality is also expressed in policy documents, including those on Population, Health and Human Resources.

Lao PDR has incorporated the main ideas of these conventions into its Constitution. However, there still remains the need to develop laws to steadily strengthen the Lao legal framework, which suffers from a shortage of experience and human capacity, and limited awareness among the population. The Ministry of Justice is making efforts to raise awareness about the plight of women and their rights. It is planning to include gender training/sessions in legal education (the curriculum for law students) at the Faculty of Law and Political Science, National University of Laos. Gender training will also be provided to crime investigators and judges of the Supreme Court, and raise awareness of people's human rights, especially women, ethnic minorities, children and other disadvantaged people.

2.2. Institutional framework

The Lao Women's Union (LWU) and the Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women (LaoNCAW) are spearheading the empowerment of Lao women

Lao Women's Union

One of four mass organizations, the LWU is the only institution that is constitutionally and politically mandated to represent Lao women of all ethnic groups and to "protect women's rights and interests." The LWU took roots in the Lao Patriotic Women Association founded in 1955, which historically mobilized women to participate in the struggle for national independence. By reaching out to women from the national (ministry level) to the provincial, district and village levels, and by implementing the "three quality targets: being a good citizen, being good in development, and having a good cultural family," the LWU serves as a bridge between the People's Revolutionary Party, the Government, and Lao women from various ethnic groups and socio-economic strata. Its main responsibility is to improve the living conditions and status of Lao women. The number of LWU women members had risen to 970,650 by the end of 2005, approximately half of all eligible women.

The LWU promotes and monitors the implementation of women 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. The organization endeavours to put gender issues on the agenda of every government sector development plan, and as such enables women to participate in policy and decision-making. The LWU also

focuses on socio-economic development at the grassroots level to improve the living conditions of women and their families.

The organization's programs span 20 development projects focused on income generation, credit/saving schemes, education, nutrition, and reproductive health, most of which are supported by donor agencies. Besides their own projects, LWU is conducting activities with various governmental partners, such as the ministries of Health, Education, Finance (Land Department), Justice, Information and Culture, and Science, Technology and Environment (STEA), and is co-operating with many international NGOs. The LWU works in close co-operation with the National Statistic Center (NSC) to promote the collection and use of sex-disaggregated statistics; it also works with the Committee of Planning and Investment (CPI) to elaborate the gender mainstreaming methodology in the planning process at village and district levels.

The LWU has since 1997 been playing a prominent role in advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment through the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID), through creating gender awareness, and providing gender analysis for Government officials at all levels to facilitate gender mainstreaming. 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, conducted research and gender analysis on various topics, which it disseminates widely, including through its five libraries/resource centers, at the Central Library of Laos and National University of Laos. GRID seeks to build the gender capacity of Government staff from various ministries to enable them to mainstream gender in planning and programming. In 2001, upon the request of the LWU, the office of the Prime Minister (PMO) issued Directive Number 0009 of January 5th, 2000, on the use of sex-disaggregated statistics in the national statistical system and socio-economic planning. Since then, GRID and NSC have set out to explain the importance of sex-disaggregated statistics, introduced gender indicators, and advocated the implementation of the Directive.

While the Lao Women's Union (LWU) is represented in every ministry and has a mandate to advance women's status in sector policies and programs, it faces many constraints in mainstreaming gender in the Government's work, namely (a) the lack of human capacity to effectively carry out gender mainstreaming within programs and through training exercises for ministry staff; (b) the lack of accurate sex-disaggregated and relevant gender data to support policy-making; (c) limited budget and resources to support the gender mainstreaming process; and (d) poor coordination of gender mainstreaming activities among Government ministries, international donors and INGOs.

Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women

The Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women (LaoNCAW) was established in 2002. The Commission aims to take the lead in mainstreaming gender concerns at the national, provincial, district and village levels and has a high profile leadership committee, which is made up of very senior level government officials. The Prime Minister's Decree Number 37 outlines the functions, roles, rights, important

elements and organizational structure of the LaoNCAW. The roles and tasks of the LaoNCAW are:

1. To assist the Government in formulating national policy guidance and strategic plans of action to promote women's advancement and gender equality in all spheres and at all levels of society.
2. To act as the Focal Point and coordinate closely with local authorities and international organizations concerns for the implementation of the party and Government policy on the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

LaoNCAW is planning to establish gender focal points in each ministry to promote the advancement of women in each sector.

2.3. Policy framework

The Lao Government is committed to gender equality and gender mainstreaming

These are clear indications that the Lao Government is committed to gender equality. In May 2000, the Prime Minister's Office issued a Directive on the integration of sex-disaggregated statistics in policy and planning gender-sensitive development programs/projects. In 2002, the Government established the LaoNCAW. The Government's commitment to gender equality is also expressed in a number of policy documents, including those on Population, Health and Human Resources.

Additionally, the Government requires all ministries to develop strategies and action plans to promote gender equality at the national, provincial, district and village levels. Under the direction of LaoNCAW, ministries have started to mainstream gender into their activities. They are establishing high-level gender working groups, collecting sex-disaggregated data relevant to poverty reduction, and are using the data to develop gender profiles or assessments of their sectors. They are building the gender capacity of their staff, identifying issues/problems related to women's participation and developing gender strategies and action plans to address those. The ministries are making efforts to improve the gender and ethnic balance of staff at all levels, screening all new policies, programs and projects from a gender perspective, and consulting local women in the design of new projects for poverty reduction, and ensuring that they participate in project activities, including extension services and training.

Gender awareness and mainstreaming are not uniform across Ministries

A number of challenges continue to pose constraints to the formulation of gender specific national policies or programs. These include the lack of human and financial resources; poor coordination; the lack of accurate data, especially sex-disaggregated statistics and relevant gender information for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation purposes; the lack of greater coordination in gender mainstreaming among government

organizations, international development agencies and NGOs; and the lack of facilities and budget to support gender mainstreaming.

Gender equality is high on the agenda of the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES)

Gender is recognised as a crosscutting priority in the NGPES, the strategy that articulates Lao PDR's development framework for poverty reduction, including targets, goals and policies and public expenditure programs needed to achieve these goals. The NGPES encapsulates the country's approach towards graduating from the group of Low Developed Countries (LDCs) by 2020, which entails achieving long-term national development through sustained equitable economic growth and social development, while safeguarding the country's social, cultural, economic and political identity. To attain these objectives, the Government has outlined the following strategic priorities:

- Maintain an appropriate level of economic growth for the medium and long-term period in response to demographic trends;
- Enhance human resource development through education, particularly basic education at all levels and including the formal and informal sector as well as occasional training;
- Develop and modernize social and economic infrastructure in order to facilitate economic development in each region of the country and to accelerate Lao PDR's regional and international economic integration;
- Facilitate access to electricity for people in all areas and regions of the country in order to foster integrated economic development;
- Promote industries utilizing domestic natural resources, and actively promote small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and handicrafts production;
- Develop and promote all economic sectors, particularly the private sector, including foreign direct investment (FDI) in order to expand business opportunities, placing emphasis on export-oriented sectors that have a comparative advantage.
- Strengthen existing legal and regulatory frameworks;
- Create favorable conditions and mechanisms for improving financial institutions and further capital market development and trade facilitation;
- Promote economic co-operation with all partners and countries.

Promoting gender equality is at the heart of poverty eradication efforts

The Government recognizes the productive role of Lao women in maintaining household food security and health through agriculture and other economic activities. It also acknowledges that it is unable to achieve the goals of reducing poverty and improving national education, health and population indicators without their active participation, particularly that of poor women of different ethnic groups. In this regard, the GOL is taking concrete steps in all key economic sectors and through national programs to support poor women's economic activities by improving their access to basic services

(education, health, etc); resources (extension services, credit, etc); involving them in local decision-making processes; and considering their needs when developing national policy.

Through the NGPES, the Government is addressing gender concerns in agriculture, education, health, population, infrastructure and transportation, environment, and other sectors. Guidelines have been developed for a National Gender Action Plan to integrate gender strategies and action plans of ministries, agencies and mass organizations under the guidance and co-ordination of LaoNCAW.

(a) Agriculture- In the *agriculture sector*, gender concerns will be addressed through:

- Producing gender-related data and needs assessments
- Including women in project activities.
- Applying gender equity in extension and training services.
- Using gender-related indicators to monitor projects.
- Applying affirmative action concerning staffing of provincial and district staff, including extension workers.
- Designating gender focal points in villages to promote improved agricultural practices.
- Taking account of women's traditional rights in land reallocation, land titling and resolution of land disputes.
- Assisting women in accessing rural savings and credit schemes.

(b) Education- In the *education sector*, gender concerns will be addressed through:

- Addressing gender gaps in literacy, school enrolment and completion rates, particularly among different ethnic groups.
- Increasing the availability, quality and relevance of primary and secondary education for girls, particularly poor and ethnic girls;
- Ensuring that vocational and technical school programs are accessible to women, particularly poor and ethnic women;
- Establishing approaches to non-formal education that are highly beneficial to women including drawing upon lessons from past and current projects for increasing the number of ethnic teachers; improving the relevance of primary school materials and providing incentives for girls to attend school; encouraging provinces and districts to develop locally appropriate materials to supplement the core curriculum; and to schedule primary and secondary school classes to encourage school attendance. Other approaches include distance learning and "bridging" courses to enable students (particularly women) to enter vocational and technical schools.

(c) Health- In the *health sector*, gender concerns will be addressed through:

- Reducing substantially maternal and infant mortality rates.
- Improving women's access to primary health care, particularly reproductive health services.
- Involving women – particularly women in poor villages and districts – in order to ensure successful implementation of immunization, clean water and other public health programs.

- Addressing gender concerns through all major health care initiatives including training of ethnic women in health services; designating a gender focal point in each provincial and district primary health center; establishing gender and ethnic balance in village health committees and in all in-service and specialized training for health staff and health care providers; and providing incentive packages for health care workers assigned to remote districts and villages.
- Using radio and other media to promote health education to men and youth, particularly relating to birth spacing and prevention of STD/HIV/AIDS infection.
- Expanding access to reproductive health services, especially ethnic women.

(d) Transport- In the *transport sector*, gender concerns will be addressed through:

- Taking into account women's needs in planning and implementing road and other transport-related infrastructure, including negative environmental and social impacts since they tend to fall more heavily on poor women.
- Consulting local communities, including women, in the design of transport and other infrastructure projects.
- Including analysis of gender-related benefits and impacts of new road construction and other infrastructure projects.
- Ensuring that community development projects are designed to ensure that rural communities benefit from roads and other infrastructure projects.
- Collecting gender data to monitor the impacts of these projects, and ensuring the participation of women representatives in community road maintenance funds.

Lao PDR has made progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but still has a long way to go

Lao PDR has the resources to reduce poverty. As the recent Lao Human Development Report shows, the human development index has improved during the last decade, passing this year from a low to a medium human development country. This development also represents important progress towards the MDGs. The index shows an increasing trend since 1993, when Lao ranked 141st of 173 countries. In 2000, it ranked 140th out of 174, and in 2003, 135th out of 175 countries. However, it still remains behind Thailand (74th), China (104th), Vietnam (109th), Cambodia (130th), and Myanmar (131st).

Lao PDR has made some progress towards achieving the MDGs (see Box 2). In universal primary education, there has been a 20 percent improvement in the net primary enrolment rate in the last decade. With an under-five child mortality rate of 100 per 1,000 live births in 2000 against 163 per 1,000 in 1990, the country has achieved important progress in this area. In 1990 the country ranked last among 23 East Asia and Pacific (EAP) countries (*countries with available data*) while today it has surpassed Myanmar and Cambodia. The percentage of the population that is undernourished decreased from 30 to 25 percent (with an MDG target of 15 percent by 2015), and an increasing number of women are holding seats in parliament (6 percent in 1990 to 23 percent in 2003).

Despite these achievements the country still faces severe challenges in eliminating gender disparities. The country ranks last in terms of gender equality in the East Asia region

(from the 16 countries with available data from a total of 28 countries), and is classified in the report as a high priority country for reaching this goal.

Box 2: Implementation of MDGs in Lao PDR**MDG 1: Eradicate Poverty & Hunger**

An estimated 39 percent (1.9 million people) of Lao PDR's 6 million population live below the national poverty line (1997 data), with the vast majority belonging to the country's many ethnic groups. Goal 1 seeks to reduce this number to 24 percent by 2015. While in recent years Lao PDR has experienced periods of economic growth growing inequality is exacerbating poverty. It is estimated that 28 percent of the Lao population were undernourished, i.e. did not meet their daily energy requirements in 1997-99 (FAO, 2001). The population in the North is susceptible to seasonal food shortages and exposed to cyclical food insecurity due to floods.

MDG 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education

Although quantitative and qualitative progress has been made in recent years, a significant proportion of children, especially girls and ethnic groups in remote areas, are not guaranteed an equal opportunity to basic education. Access to secondary and tertiary education is particularly limited and a large proportion of the adult population is illiterate. Goal 2 seeks to ensure that by 2015 all primary school age boys and girls are enrolled in school.

MDG 3: Promote Gender Equality

Women in Lao PDR generally experience a lower standard of living than men and suffer from gender disparities, particularly in rural areas and among ethnic minorities. Women and girls continue to be disadvantaged in terms of access to educational opportunities. Fewer girls than boys are enrolled in school, and the proportion falls steadily as the level of education increases. Goal 3 calls on countries to ensure that girls have equal access to education by 2015 and to enhance women's empowerment.

MDG 4: Reduce Child Mortality

In 1999 the country's under-five mortality rate was 106 per 1,000 live births. Goal 4 sets out to reverse this trend by cutting the rate to only 55 deaths per 1,000 live births by the year 2015. This Goal is inextricably tied to the fight against poverty because the poor are the least likely to receive the health services needed to protect the lives of their children. Currently, only half of the population has access to safe drinking water, and less than half to safe sanitation facilities. Considerable efforts are required to ensure that this MDG is met including improving access for rural communities, and ensuring that ethnic and linguistic dimensions are considered.

MDG 5: Improve Maternal Health

Despite improvements in the past two decades, women continue to experience inadequate levels of reproductive care, with a maternal mortality ratio (MMR) of 530 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000. Goal 5 calls for reducing the rate of maternal MMR to 185 per 100,000 live births by 2015. Currently 89 percent of rural women deliver without a trained attendant, and most live a long distance away from any services. More investment, particularly in the quality of services and better management of health systems, is needed.

MDG 6: Combat HIV AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

HIV/AIDS prevalence is still low in Lao PDR, with an estimated adult HIV rate of around 0.06 percent. There are however several risk factors that make the country particularly vulnerable including proximity to countries with high HIV/AIDS prevalence, increasing travel and migration, increase in the use of illicit drugs, inadequate access to effective STD treatment, and low awareness of the causes and prevention of HIV/AIDS. The government's National Strategy and Action Plan to combat HIV/AIDS support widespread, multi-sectoral efforts to ensure the low prevalence rate. Other infectious diseases also seriously threaten development priorities including malaria, which has consistently been among the top three causes of reported morbidity and mortality, and tuberculosis.

MDG 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Goal 7 calls for upholding the principles of sustainable development and reversing and replenishing the loss of environmental resources. Lao PDR is endowed with a diverse and ecologically unique forest that is a vital economic resource contributing to both the Lao GDP as well as non-agricultural GDP. Some 60 percent of GDP depends directly on natural resources while rural poor largely depend on those for their basic livelihoods. Poorly implemented environmental policies, inequality of access to fertile land, and increasing pressure on land-use challenge future sustainability, making environmental management one of the core issues in poverty reduction.

MDG 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

The Lao economy remains significantly dependent on official development assistance (ODA), with bilateral and multilateral aid disbursed totaling US\$389.62 million in 2001-02. Increased expenditure both from national resources and ODA will be needed to provide social services and safety nets for communities, households and individuals, and also to build up the 'social capital' necessary for national development. In view of the limited resources the Government of Lao will be able to mobilize internally, the country will continue to depend on external assistance to realize the MDGs.

Source: UNDP, 2004

Both multilateral and bilateral donors in Lao PDR generally have internal policies on mainstreaming gender into their development activities.

Both multilateral and bilateral donors in Lao PDR generally have internal policies on mainstreaming gender into their development activities. As such, they have often pushed for enhancing gender awareness and training in the country, including for example through the establishment of GRID (UNDP project). International NGOs (INGOs) are also playing a similar role, including mainstreaming gender into their projects or targeting those to women's needs, such as income-generation activities (often focused on handicraft skills and weaving), anti-trafficking projects, and community health education. Because of women's important role in maintaining household food security, many rural development projects include agricultural training to meet women's needs and concerns.

Chapter 3

Gender, Agriculture, and Rural Resources

3.1. Overview

Lao PDR is a heavily agricultural society, with the majority of the population involved in agriculture for both subsistence and income-generating motives. Men and women spend similar amounts of time on agricultural work, but men spend more hours on income generating activities (which includes agricultural work). Women play a critical role in agriculture and the use of natural resources, and are primarily responsible for maintaining their families' food security. Their involvement spans the spectrum, from planting the seeds to collecting non-tradable food products (which contribute an average of 40 to 60 percent of the income of rural upland households, and may reach 80 percent in very poor areas), to selling produce at the market. Women are also involved in informal small-scale income earning activities and handicrafts production to supplement their family incomes. In spite of their economic and livelihood contribution, women are generally not considered as workers and rarely consulted in decisions, whether those concern irrigation schemes or credit services, among others. Women from the majority Lao-Tai ethnic group control household budgets and share in financial decision-making.

3.2. Agricultural Work and Income-generating Activities

More than half of those employed in agriculture are women, with men and women making different contributions to food security and household income

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Lao economy. Accounting for about 48 percent of the country's GDP, it employs about 85 percent of the total workforce of 2.4 million people (NSC, 2004). Indeed, most Lao PDR households depend on agriculture and its related sub-sectors such as livestock rearing, fishing and forest exploitation for their living. Income from agriculture is considered as the most important source of income for most rural Lao. Women took over the traditional roles of men in the farming system – such as ploughing – during the war period and this has in some areas continued to the present times.

Characterized by small farm holdings without secure access to productive resources, the agricultural sector remains largely at the subsistence level and is served by farm technology that is characterized by low inputs, low risks, and low outputs. Many farmers lack the necessary information and knowledge to improve agricultural and livestock productivity. Rice is the dominant crop, with different varieties and related farming techniques in the upland and lowland areas. In 2002, income from grain was about 50 percent of total agricultural production.

According to the 2002-2003 Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 3 (LECS 3), both men and women spend similar amounts of time on agricultural work – 2.5 hours and 2.3 hours respectively – and in total (including agricultural work), men spend 5.2 hours on income generating activities (IGA), versus 4.5 hours for women (see table 3). However,

these numbers may not fully measure the *value* of women's income generating work. For instance, the LECS 3 data show that women spent 0.5 hours a day on weaving, sewing and other handicrafts compared to 0.1 hours for men. Handicrafts contribute a significant proportion of household cash income in rural areas. Women also spend more time on their own businesses – 0.8 hours for women compared to 0.6 hours for men – and combined with their handicraft work, this takes up nearly one third of their total income generating activity hours. Men use about 17 percent of their IGA time on hunting and fishing compared to 4 percent for women. However, women spend about 11 percent of their IGA hours fetching water and firewood, while men spend less than 4 percent of their IGA time on such work.

Table 3: Time use on main activities by sex, hours per day

Activity	Male	Female	All
Income generating activities	5.2	4.5	4.8
Work as employed	0.8	0.3	0.5
Own business work	0.6	0.8	0.7
Agricultural work	2.5	2.3	2.4
Collecting firewood/fetching water	0.2	0.5	0.3
Hunting/fishing	0.9	0.2	0.5
Construction	0.1	0	0.1
Handicraft	0.2	0.5	0.3
Household work	0.6	2.5	1.6
School	1.3	0.9	1.1
Sleeping, eating, leisure time	15.4	14.8	15.1
Travel, others	1.6	1.2	1.4

Source: LECS 3

Women contribute significantly to rice production

Rice (glutinous) is the main food of the Lao people. The predominant crop is sticky rice, which is grown on over 78 percent of cultivated land; about one fourth is produced in the uplands through slash-and-burn cultivation (Ministry of Agriculture, 2002). Rice cultivation in paddy fields in low-land areas is one of the most important activities of the majority of Lao farmers, as is the practice of shifting cultivation in mountainous areas.

Traditionally, men plough, make bunds and prepare seedbeds, and women do more than half of the transplanting of rice, weeding, harvesting, threshing and post-harvest operations. In some areas the traditional task division has changed due to lack of male labor; women are increasingly involved in land preparation, irrigation and preparing bunds and seedbeds. In addition, women form networks for seed exchange within the villages and transplant the rice from seedbeds to the rice fields. In general, men do the land preparation, ploughing and fencing for these crops; and women do the weeding and marketing. While men are generally the ones who obtain loans for the purchase of chemical fertilizers, it is mostly women who make decisions on how to spend the family's income. Women are also responsible for selling the surplus rice production. Though women are normally responsible for transplanting rice, they get little information on improved rice cultivation practices.

The practice of shifting cultivation is extremely demanding on women; they walk long distances to the rice fields, transporting rice and other crops back home for family consumption. Weeding the rice field is women's work. The limitation of rotation time, due to limited number of production plots allocated to villagers by the local land allocation committee makes the lives of rural women more difficult. In both cases, women do most of the labor intensive work of weeding the rice fields. The large size of plots and the fact that the land is often not very suitable for cultivation (due to land re-allocations and the division of land along generations) make the land more susceptible to weeds, therefore increasing women's work in the fields (ADB/NSC 2002).

Women play an important role in collecting and gathering forest products

Forestry products are an important source of livelihood for many villagers, for some it is even an important source of income. Village households gather products from forests and brush land around their villages and include these in their daily meals. Women in particular play an important role in collecting and gathering these products, which include rattan and bamboo shoots, mushrooms, and *melientha suavis* (medicinal plant). Men are exclusively involved in hunting forest animals such as squirrels, birds/wild fowl, fish, snakes and rats. While there are a vast number of forest products (e.g. resin, bark and fruits, insects and small animals), only non-timber forest products (NTFPs) have an economic value and are gathered continuously.

NTFPs are an important source of dietary supplements, and are used for medicinal purposes and cash income in rural areas. Women are responsible for collecting a range of plant food products such as bamboo shoots, roots and wild vegetables which are critical in offsetting seasonal food shortages. NTFPs contribute an average of 40 to 60 percent of the income of rural upland households, and may reach 80 percent in areas of severe poverty where there are few other income-generating opportunities (UNDP 2001). In general, women collect the types of NTFPs suitable for sale and bring those to local markets and roadsides to sell.

Women participate in the establishment of irrigation systems, and community development projects, but are absent from decision-making

Since irrigation is an important means of securing food production, irrigation projects and the sustainability of irrigation systems are of great interest to women, particularly as they provide most of the agricultural labor in rice and vegetable cultivation and hence are involved in the water management of their fields. In addition, since women are also responsible for fetching water for domestic use, they are interested in finding more convenient ways of drawing water. Generally speaking, both women and men contribute labor to the construction, operation, and maintenance of systems and other infrastructure projects. They also provide assistance by cooking or delivering meals to volunteers. However, a number of studies have revealed that few women participate in the management and decisions surrounding irrigation schemes, and that there can still be constraints to women's participation in community development projects (see Box 3). The reasons for this absence include women's household chores, traditional roles, and

responsibilities in taking care of the family; the lack of time and opportunities to participate in meetings; and the fact that women are expected to be neither leaders nor household heads.

Box 3: Gender & the Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP)

With World Bank support, the Government implemented FOMACOP between 1996 and 2000. Activities included the construction and renovation of schools, fish ponds, dams, wells, and road improvements. The project established Village Forestry Authorities (VFAs) for all forest management work, from harvesting timber to receiving revenues. Today, some villages have their own funds for village development activities, with most villages choosing to use their revenues for investments in infrastructure. Women and girls, who traditionally gather and carry water for household use, have more access to water sources. These investments in roads and other infrastructure facilitate their life, improve their work, and lighten their workload. Improved roads have provided women with more employment opportunities, better access to health, education and other basic services. Women have also used village development funds for income-generating purposes.

However, from a gender-perspective, there were also some problems which arose during implementation. For example, women were more involved in road clearing work which gets lower rates of compensation, and men were more involved in jobs with higher rates of compensation. Moreover, at the project level, female representation in decision-making was very low, and there was a lack of female technical staff throughout the agency, especially at the district level. Among forestry extension workers visiting field sites, there were fewer women than men. This had implications for fieldwork, particularly in remote ethnic minority villages where it is difficult for male staff to work with female villagers. Fortunately, some INGOs, recognizing the importance of women's role in agriculture, trained and involved women as agricultural extension workers at the village level.

(GRID & SUFORD, 2004)

Men and women share tasks and responsibilities in rural aquaculture

In Lao PDR, aquaculture is relatively new in some provinces, with men and women sharing tasks and responsibilities. Generally, men are responsible for pond preparation, pond weeding, drying or draining and the regulation of water entry into pond prior to stocking, with the help of women. Liming the pond (when done) is the responsibility of men. Men generally operate pump or pond gate operations and other water exchange practices. In general, women usually prepare feed for fish, such as collecting rice bran, grass and any other available vegetable waste that is fed to the fish. Ideally farmed fish should be fed regularly. Although most women harvest and decide on the fish for daily/weekly family consumption, any overall major harvest of fish is under the control of men. When a large batch of fish is harvested from a pond using cast nets, it is considered a man's responsibility. Women are the sellers, buyers, traders, middle-persons of table-sized fish. Traditionally, Lao Loum women keep the household money. In Lao Loum households, women control the income generated from the sale of fish, which is used for purchasing household items. This is likely to also be the case in Lao Loum villages that are just beginning to raise fish to sell in the future, because women are already involved in the marketing of agricultural and livestock products in these villages *(FAO, 2001)*.

3.3. Access to Land

While women and men enjoy equal access to land under the law, customary practices tend to over-ride these

Under the laws of Lao PDR, both men and women enjoy equal access to land (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, customary practices – principally through inheritance – often over-ride official laws. This situation is predominantly determined by the matrilineal or patrilineal practices of the various ethnic groups.

The matrilineal practices of the majority Lao-Tai group mean that women often have more control of land in the areas populated by this group. Daughters and sons are allowed to inherit land, with the decision being left up to the parents. However, it is customary for the youngest daughter to inherit the family land/home since she usually remains there to take care of the parents, even after marriage.

Among most ethnic minority groups, such as the Hmong-lu Mien and the Khmou (Mon Khmer), the pattern of land ownership is patrilineal. The family name and property are transmitted from father to son, and the wife takes up “patrilocal residence”, i.e. she has to live in her husband’s house. Men are considered the “owners and administrators of land,” with women “generally not inheriting land from their parents.” (GRID, 1998).

Land documents tend to be registered in men’s names

In 1998, GRID in cooperation with the NSC conducted a survey on Lao women’s access to land. Survey results showed the difference in the names/titles that appeared on the land documents and the origin of the land. As can be seen from Figures 1 and 2, only 16 percent of land was registered in the wife’s name, although 40 percent of the land came from the wife’s parents. Fifty-eight percent of land was registered in the husband’s name, with only 18 percent of the land having come from the husband’s parents.

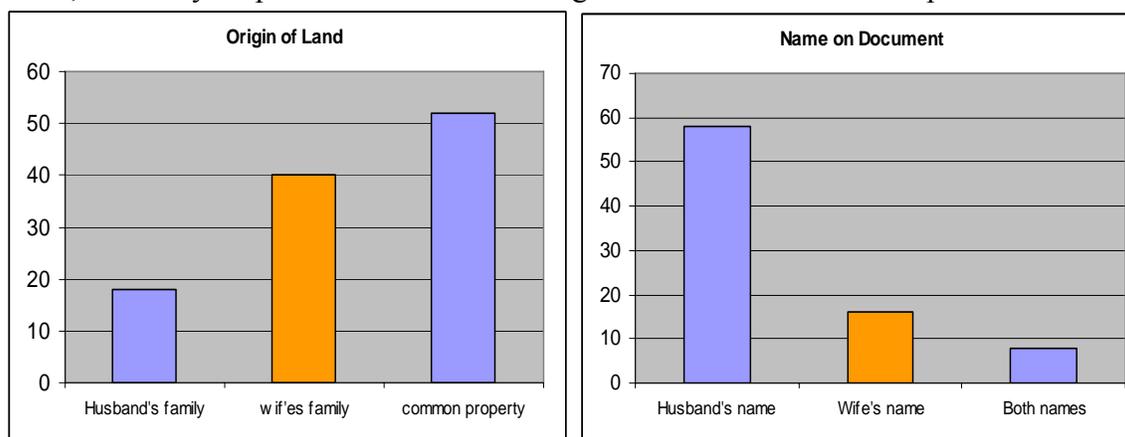


Figure 1 & 2: Gender and land titling by origin of land and name on title document
 Source: GRID, 1998

Part of this situation can be attributed to the lack of knowledge on and difficulty in accessing information on women’s land rights. Other reasons, particularly for ethnic

minority women from mono-ethnic villages, include illiteracy, the inability to speak and read the Lao language, existing gender differences related to customary land rights, and lack of self-confidence. The generally-held view that men are the head of household, and thus their names appear on administrative documents also contributes to this situation.

Box 4: The Land Titling Project in the Lao PDR

Since the mid 1990s, the Government of Lao has been implementing a Land Titling Program through two projects (LTP1 and LTP2), with the aim of extending permanent land use titles in urban, peri-urban and rural/agricultural areas. Playing a key role in the project has been the LWU, which has been leading – through village meetings – information and awareness raising campaigns on the benefits of land titles as well as on Lao citizens’ – both men and women – legal rights. Additionally, the district and village-level LWU is playing an important role in increasing the number of parcels of land titles to women. According to the 2004 Socio-economic baseline study (SEBS), the LTP1 succeeded, to a greater extent than other land programs, in extending to women legal documentation to land rights. In LTP2, the LWU will represent women in the deliberations of future land policies as well as actively participate in monitoring project performance.

Source: Land Titling Project Social Economic Baseline Survey 2003.

3.4. Access to Infrastructure and Markets

In rural areas, access to roads, piped water, and markets is limited, particularly for women in ethnic minority villages

In Lao PDR access to roads and other infrastructure is closely related to geographic location. Overall access to markets, schools and health facilities is more limited in rural than in urban areas, in highland – where ethnic minority groups predominate – than in lowland areas. The National Census 2005 indicates that about 66.4 percent of the villages could be accessed by road which is a basic precondition for social and economic development. About 50 per cent of national roads and less than 2 per cent of provincial roads are paved, and access becomes more severe during the rainy season, leading to high transport costs. Even during the dry season access is limited, with 65 percent of villages not being reachable by truck (GoL, 2004). For rural households, the average distance to the nearest road is 4.3 kilometers (GoL 2004). Road access is also a general determinant of the availability of water and electricity in a village. The number of villages with access to electricity in the country is low. It was noted that only 35 percent of the villages could use electricity (NSC, 2005). Although almost all urban villages have electricity, this is the case for only 13 percent of villages without access to roads.

Water and sanitation are still a big problem in Lao PDR. On the positive side, access to piped water or water from protected wells/boreholes has doubled since 1995. However, access to safe drinking water and sanitation is still very limited, at 53 percent and 42 percent respectively. Access to safe water is particularly a problem in the priority districts with less than 30 percent having access compared to over 55 percent in other districts. (NSC *et al*, 2006). This situation particularly affects the rural poor, a mere 32 percent of whom have access to safe water, and the non dominant ethnic groups. At 58 percent, Lao Tai villages report the highest access rate, while Chine Tibet villages – at 25 percent –

report the lowest. As for the other two main ethnic groups, their reported access rate – around 30 percent – falls in between the above-mentioned two (NSC *et al*, 2006).

Poor public infrastructure has added to the costs of small enterprises such as handicraft producers, among whom women predominate. Women traditionally enjoy less mobility than men, and thus are not able to access all available markets. As women have limited mobility, and traditional customs do not allow women to leave home to work far away from the village, overnight trips to markets in town are the responsibility of men.

There is no systematic marketing information service available for producers, and little or no market information is provided in newspapers, on the radio or television. Prices in the market are mostly controlled by “middlemen,” resulting in little bargaining power for individual farmers/producers. As many ethnic minority villages are located in remote areas, they are sometimes completely cut off from the outside world. Their isolation is compounded to their lack of understanding of or ability to speak Lao.

3.5. Access to Financial Resources and Credit

Ethnicity determines whether men or women are the household’s financial managers

There is a lack of recent information on household finances or access to credit, however, the Household Finance Survey revealed that there was a very broad distribution of savings throughout the rural population in 1997 (UNDP 1997). Savings strategies were both financial and non-financial, and about 91 percent of all households had financial savings and 92 percent had non-financial savings (mainly in the form of non-producing livestock and precious metals). There was a very low level of depository mobilization by both formal and informal sectors and these savings were rarely converted into deposits. The survey revealed that less than 1 percent of rural households held bank deposits at the time, 1 percent held their savings in informal group deposits, 11 percent held them in cash, 14 percent in precious metals and 74 percent as the net value of livestock.

The primary source of credit to rural households was family, friends and lending households (33 percent), especially for those far from roads and from more remote areas. The loan size was small, with many of the loans taken for consumption purposes between periods of planting and harvesting. Accounting for almost one half of household debt, many of these loans did not carry an explicit interest rate and were obtained without collateral for short-term purposes. Informal institutions accounted for only 15 percent of lending. Suppliers of inputs, and moneylenders were an important source of loans for farmers. Where they operated, interest charged ranged from 42 to 73 percent per annum. Farmers approach these sources mainly for household emergencies and day-to-day survival needs.

In Lao-Tai dominant areas (peri-urban and Rural Mekong), between 61 percent and 64 percent of household financial managers were women (UNDP, 1997). Men were financial managers in 63 percent of rural households. This distinction reflects the differences between the matriarchal Lao-Tai groups that dominate in peri-urban and rural

Mekong areas, and the patriarchal societies that are more common among ethnic groups of the highland areas. From the survey findings, the primary reason for taking loans is to cover emergencies or unforeseen expenditures. Business investment came second.

Women are culturally reluctant to borrow from banks

Evidence from a number of large markets in Vientiane shows that women do not like to go through formalities to get loans and are too shy to enter a banking institution (GRID 2003). Culturally, they feel ashamed to borrow. They shy away from going to banks to process loans and are rarely familiar with banking procedures, consequently depending heavily on their husbands. Furthermore, most women do not know that they can use their land as collateral for getting loans from banks. As a result, many women put the loan in their husband's name, as he is usually literate and able to deal with all the requisite processes including the loan repayment. Culturally women feel it is shameful to borrow, and they fear that people will discover they are in debt. They therefore prefer to get a quick loan from moneylenders offering uncomplicated lending systems or joining informal savings schemes and credit groups.

Informal credit schemes are an important source of financing for rural villagers

Village Revolving Funds (VRFs) are local village institutions that operate outside the formal financial sector and are neither taxed nor regulated. VRFs are locally managed groups and operate between social and financial organizations. Generally financed by donors or INGOs and including over 1,000 "rice banks," VRFs provide loans to about 15 percent of rural villages and have grown rapidly in the last ten years. With about 1,640 of them throughout Lao PDR, these locally implemented funds are rooted in some form of financial or commodity (non-financial) lending (UNDP, 1997). They support either income generation activities or food security and improved production for consumption or sale, thus keeping in-line with the non-monetized nature of rural economic activity.

There are also many "livestock banks" and revolving credit funds that are established under integrated rural development projects that lend money. For instance, the LWU is frequently used by intermediary international donors and INGOs (see Box 5). Terms, conditions and other criteria and methods of loan disbursement vary widely from one scheme to another, and among donors and INGO operations. Repayments are made in

Box 5: Micro-credit Facilities for Women in Lao- What the LWU is doing

In collaboration with donors and INGOs, the LWU has been promoting micro-credit facilities in agriculture, animal husbandry and primary health projects. The projects have the potential to spur enterprise development and in many cases expand women's roles by allowing them to enter an official sphere. In some cases the credit is a fund for an income generating activities, which allow women to supplement their household incomes. The aim of these credit services is both economic and social. In Lao PDR, there is a general feeling that neither of these goals is being reached. A high inflation rate, caused mainly by currency devaluation, has contributed to the degeneration of cash funds, making the economic objectives impossible to reach through current models of revolving fund programs. There is the perception that many programs have failed to improve the status of women, particularly in the context of women's active role in economic activity but marginal role in decision making (GRID, 2003).

kind or cash, with or without interest, full or partial principal repayment, etc.

In informal credit schemes, men generally represent their families in meetings

As heads of the household, men represent their families at all official meetings related to credit funds. There were no perceived contradictions between men being the decision makers for activities performed by women (i.e. chicken and pig-rearing, and embroidery). All parties felt that women perform their activities for the benefit of the household, and men “get” the loan for the benefit of the household. Men were described as the heads of the households, and women as the ‘deputies.’ Moreover, many women ethnic minorities are not able to articulate their opinions because most of them are illiterate and have limited skills to participate in village meetings. As a result, most women ethnic minorities cannot participate effectively in VRFs (Concern Worldwide, 1999).

In rice banks and revolving funds for small animals, female committee members play a very limited role in decision making

Many INGOs have implemented rice banks as a part of integrated rural development programs in the Lao PDR. In most cases they set up rice banks, train local committees, grant rice and build rice storage sheds. When families suffer from a rice deficit, they are allowed to borrow rice from the rice banks. These banks usually have committees of three members/individuals, including one woman (at the request of INGOs) who is normally a representative of the village LWU and is normally given the position of accountant.

More often than not, rice bank committees are not able to fulfill the duties envisioned and designed by the international INGOs. For instance, female committee members play a very limited role in decision making. As a result, the village head (usually a man) is the main controller of the rice dispersal system. Since not all families can borrow during the same cycle of rice dispersal, criteria are put in place to meet the necessary decisions. These are based on a combination of need and family importance. Everyone, except the few who can meet their rice needs gets their turn. Need is connected to the amount of labor the family has. For example, a family with many young children is considered more in need than a family with older children. Households that do not have husbands (widows, divorcees or old women) are also in the target group of borrowers.

Since women are the primary caretakers of small animals such as chickens, ducks, and pigs, it is assumed that they are eager to get involved in credit schemes for their own activities. However, once a woman’s activity becomes ‘official’ – by virtue of the INGO’s involvement in it – the official aspects become the responsibility of men. Women’s participation at the management level of revolving funds for small animals is usually very low. While this is the case for most microfinance projects in the highland areas with ethnic groups, it warrants attention because women feed the animals as well as collect and prepare animal feed. Despite women’s monopoly in the work related to small animals, men generally perform all duties related to loans, which are typically given to

households and not individuals. Therefore, men as the heads of the household represent their families at committee meetings.

3.6. Natural Resources and the Environment

Lao PDR ranks as one of the most bio-diverse countries in the region, second-only to Cambodia in species-density in Southeast Asia. This rich biodiversity is threatened by the rapid degradation of forests. Lao PDR is one of the few Asian countries which does not yet have a protected area system in place and lacks protection legislation.

Women have demonstrated that they are not only the primary users but also the most effective protectors of forests

Closely tied to their role of ensuring livelihood security for their families, women play a distinct role in managing, utilizing and conserving natural resources. Women are major forest users, collecting fuel-wood and non timber forest products (NTFPs). In many areas, women have demonstrated that they are not only the primary users but also the most effective protectors of forests. Several studies shows that women and girls made frequent trips to sites near the village to gather the daily forest resources, such as bamboo shoots, mushrooms, rattan shoots, fire woods, and etc. Expanded trade in NTFPs can increase incomes for the families that harvest and sell them, but the rapid depletion of NTFPs in rural areas also can deprive poor households of alternative food sources and natural medicines. As a result, poor women may have to travel farther to collect NTFPs to meet their families' food and health needs. Timesaving improvements such as rice mills and clean water sources near villages and sustainable cultivation of fuel wood and NTFPs can mitigate these negative effects (ADB, 2004). Unfortunately, women are often ignored in livelihood and conservation development programs, and less attention is given to gender/ethnic issues in the design of development efforts.

Poor women are affected by environmental hazards and degradation

Protecting the environment and preserving natural resources are essential for sustainable development. The poor are the most affected by environmental degradation and lack of access to clean affordable energy services. Poor women and children are more affected by environmental hazards and environmental degradation than any other group (UNDP 2002); they disproportionately suffer the consequences of poor or lack of energy services, the serious health problems caused by indoor and air pollution, the lack of electricity and the enormous amount of time and effort spent on gathering fuel wood and fetching water.

Wood fuel is linked to the daily lives of Lao women

Wood fuel is of great importance to the daily lives of many Lao, especially those living in rural areas and outside big cities. The National Statistics Centre (NSC) data show that 97 percent of households in Lao PDR use wood or charcoal as their main source of fuel for cooking. Custom and tradition define and perpetuate the idea that women should take sole responsibility for firewood collection for family use, an idea that is particularly

dominant amongst certain ethnic minority groups such as the Mon-Khmer. Other groups, such as the dominant Lao Tai and Hmong-Iu allow for some flexibility, particularly during times of pregnancy and childrearing (GRID, 2001)

In addition to being time-intensive, collecting firewood is labor-intensive, causing significant problems for pregnant women, women who are caring for small children, and those who are sick or disabled. A woman who collects wood for a family of 5-6 must carry 120-150 loads of wood per year. Each load, carried on the back or shoulder, weighs 15-20 kilos and uses 1-3 hours of walking and cutting time. Our estimates of volume, based on reports of daily usage and size of woodpiles, correspond to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry estimates of 1 cubic meter per person per year.

Women and children are most at risk from indoor air pollution

Indoor air pollution is a major risk factor in several diseases, and is caused by the use of low-cost traditional energy sources such as coal and bio-mass (wood, dung, crop residues) for cooking and heating. Women and children are most at risk as they are more likely to be close to the cooking place, and spend more time indoors. Households most at risk are those using cheap bio-mass fuels and who have their kitchen indoors. The Chine-Tibet and Hmong-Iu who live in the high altitude areas and often use primitive stoves without proper ventilation are at the highest risk. Amongst these groups between 93 and 99 percent use wood or coal for cooking, and three in four Chine Tibet households, and two in three Hmong-Iu households have the kitchen inside the house. (NSC *et al*, 2006)

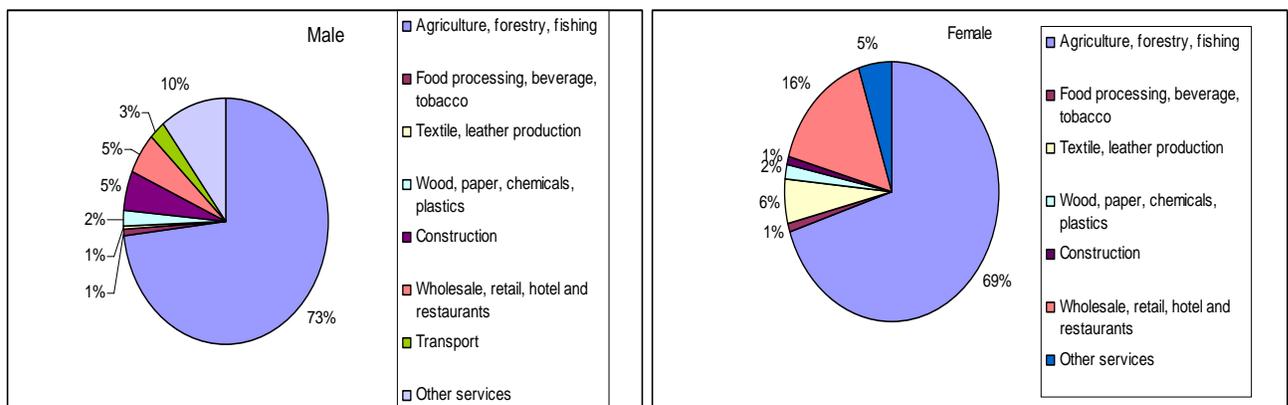
Chapter 4 Economic Participation

4.1. Overview

Lao women's economic participation is one of the highest in the region, but their efforts are often unrecognized. Although women contribute heavily to agricultural production and livelihood security – both of which have an economic value – they are rarely considered farmers. Moreover, women predominate as unpaid family workers in many sectors, which reinforces their economic dependence, limits their educational and other opportunities, and hampers their potential to build their capacities and generate family incomes.

The informal sector absorbs the great majority of Lao women, who tend to own small businesses mainly in retail and textiles. While they compose the bulk of small businesses, women's businesses tend to confront a number of obstacles, many of which are tied to cultural constraints such as those that hamper women's mobility. The expansion of women's businesses is also limited by cultural norms about the appropriateness of borrowing (as seen in the previous chapter). As for the formal sector, it remains relatively undeveloped and most wage-earning opportunities are found in urban areas. This is mainly due to the fact that the majority of the labor force works in agriculture. More women than men work in the formal sector, although women tend to be found in low-skilled jobs, rarely in management positions. Finally, migration is becoming an option for many Lao men and women, one which is associated with increasing vulnerabilities particularly for women and children.

4.2. Labor Force Participation



Figures 3 & 4: Total hours worked in different sectors as percent of total hours, by gender

Source: LECS 3

Women's labor force participation in Lao PDR is amongst the highest in the region

At above 70 percent, women's labor force participation in Lao PDR is amongst the highest in the region after Vietnam. Similar rates are found in Cambodia, where most

households also practice subsistence agriculture (Mekong River Commission 2003). Lower female participation rates and greater differences between the rates for men and women occur in Northeast Thailand (below 50 percent in some provinces) and the Mekong Delta (below 65 percent in most provinces) as well as in Phnom Penh and Pailin.

Agriculture, which employs about 85 percent of the total labor force of 2.4 million people, employs about 54 percent of women compared to 48 percent men. About 38 percent of those in industry are women, 41 percent in trade, and 57 percent in the service sectors (UNIDO 2001). However, high labor force participation rates do not fully measure women's contribution to the economy. Official data are passed on as primary occupations and formal sector activities that involve monetary transactions. The majority of unpaid family workers are women, who are generally responsible for household management – collecting fuelwood and water, cleaning, cooking and caring for children, the elderly and the sick. Additionally, women's trading and small businesses dominate informal sector activities in the lower Mekong Basin. This work is often a secondary occupation for women.

4.3. Informal Sector

The majority of those in the informal sector in Lao PDR are women

The lack of education and formal sector economic opportunities push women into the informal sector and small scale enterprises, with the majority of those in the informal sector in Lao PDR being women. According to the 1996 National Survey on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), 63 percent of SMEs were owned by women, compared with only about one third (35 percent) by men, with the difference that male-owned enterprises were slightly larger (MIH-GTZ 1996). Female entrepreneurs had significantly less education than male entrepreneurs; the proportion of female owners with no schooling (22 percent) was almost twice as high as that of men in that category (12 percent).

Women dominate small-scale retail enterprises

The most common sub-sectors for women's commercial micro and small enterprises were retail, vending, and guesthouse/restaurants (see Figure 5). In the manufacturing sector, textiles appeared to be the exclusive domain of women (24 percent), with men only making up 1 percent of workers (MIH-GTZ 1996). Almost 95 percent of women's business used only hand tools, in contrast to 52 percent of men's businesses. Women's enterprises were more likely to be home-based, and more likely to be located in the marketplace, whereas men's businesses were much more likely to be mobile.

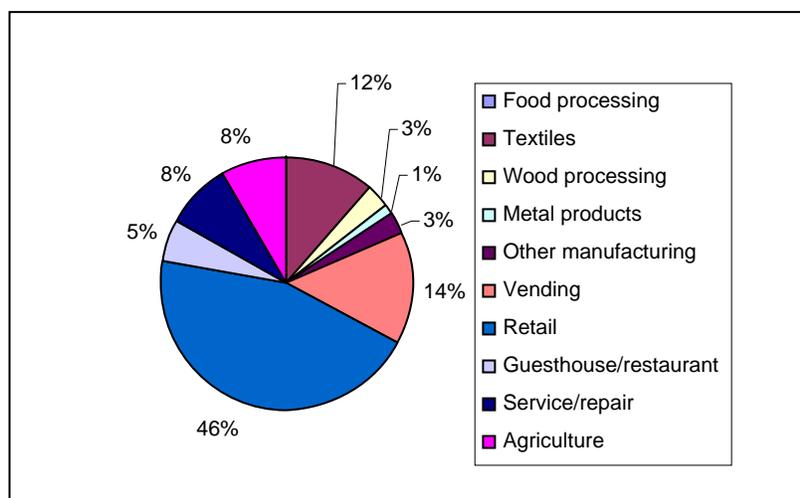


Figure 5: Types of Women-owned Businesses

Source: GRID, 2004

Non-Agricultural activities provide income opportunities for women

Most off-farm activities are undertaken by both men and women, but generally in rural areas women have more opportunities – from weaving (cotton and silk) and embroidery – than men to earn cash income. Many women undertake indigo and mulberry planting for silkworm-raising as well as silk-weaving (see Box 6), which is used for household consumption, local markets and export to foreign countries (about US\$ 5 million per annum).

Box 6: Lao Women & the Art of Hand-weaving

Since ancient times, Lao women have dominated hand-weaving, and the patterns of Lao cloth reflect the cultural, religious and ritualistic symbols of the ethnic groups, regions, and even villages. Until recently, Lao weavers spun either cotton or reeled silk, dyed their yarns, and wove mainly for personal use rather than for commercial gain. When the country opened up its economy in the late 1980s, the evolution of the hand-weaving industry gained momentum. Weaving workshops have been set up in villages and products have come to urban markets in Lao PDR and abroad. The New Economic Mechanism produced two significant impacts on the hand-weaving industry. Firstly, Lao travelers, foreign tourists, and Thai citizens prompted the development of new markets for weaving. And secondly, imported factory-spun yarns enabled weavers to produce high quality cloth. However, a number of limitations have emerged. Because of the high dependence on imported raw materials (silk as well as cotton yarn), exports of Lao cloth do little to improve the trade imbalance. The Lao silkworm is of the wild variety, and reeling technology still uses indigenous tools. As a result, good-quality silk yarn cannot be produced domestically. Additionally, with the presence of Western clothing on the Lao market after economic liberalization, the custom of weaving a wrap-around skirt (Sin) has slowly been fading.

(GRID, 2004)

Constraints affect women's businesses and informal sector workers

A number of challenges affect female workers in the informal sector. Multiple responsibilities, compounded by the limited level of education, experience, and access to

resources are some of the main challenges they confront. Moreover, women entrepreneurs who run businesses to generate income for household purposes have little capital to invest in business growth. Marketing constraints also pose an obstacle, as women lack the awareness, knowledge and skills related to vocational development, business opportunity identification, simple accounting, and entrepreneurship. Mobility constraints and the limited nature of the domestic market – in terms of the number of consumers and their purchasing power – also pose a challenge. Because of their low level of education and demands on time, women entrepreneurs face difficulties dealing with complicated and time consuming business registration procedures, often lacking the confidence to handle legal documents and to communicate with official authorities. Other challenges include limited credit, complicated lending procedures, villagers' fear of borrowing, and borrowers' lack of collateral.

4.4. Formal Sector

There are more female workers than men in the formal sector, but many are less skilled than men and relegated to manual tasks

In Lao PDR, equal access to employment is provided for in the country's labor law. In 1999, there were about 37,075 workers employed in mining, manufacturing, electricity, and water supply. Of these, 54 percent were women and 46 percent were men. About 70 percent were production workers, 13 percent technicians, 10 percent administrative, and 7 percent seasonal and temporary workers. The highest numbers of production workers were in the textile and garment industry, of which 85 percent are women. If we exclude the garment industry, the number of women employed in the production industry is about 33 percent compared to 67 percent for men.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Employees by Sex and Functional Categories

	Production workers	Technicians	Administrative workers	Seasonal & Temporary Workers	Total
Male	37	86	62	28	45
Female	63	14	38	72	55
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: MIH and UNIDO, 2001

Despite women's strong presence in the manufacturing sector, many are in low positions that involve neither management nor decision-making, even with the same educational and work qualifications as their male counterparts. According to the same survey, the number of female workers is higher among production, seasonal and temporary workers. Non-metallic mineral products (brick and tile industry) and basic metal products industries employ more seasonal and temporary workers than others. Out of 1,559 workers, 800 female employees worked in these establishments.

Salaries for women are lower than for men

Variations in salaries, wages and other kinds of remuneration are common between female and male workers. The average salaries and wages of female workers in the textile and garment industry are lower than men's. Average wages were higher in mining

and quarrying and lower in manufacturing industries. In 1999, male workers received an average of 2.66 million Kip against 1.41 million Kip paid on average to female workers. This is partly explained by the fact that average wages and salaries the textile and garment industries – where women predominate – are lower than those in other industries where men predominate.

Women’s promotion opportunities are limited by discrimination and the lack of education

Women’s lack of education limits their access to employment in the formal sector. If employed, it is even harder for them to climb to management positions. The small size and competitive nature of the labor market also pose a constraint and the number of women with working experience, and educational qualifications for management positions is also small. More often than not, employment and recruitment policies discriminate against women, and recruitment and promotions within organizations are often not-female friendly. Other constraints to women’s employment include the lack and/or limited information dissemination on available jobs and women’s multiple roles.

4.5. Migrant Labor

Migration is becoming an increasingly common choice among Lao workers

With the growth of the cash economy in rural areas and greater transportation links, migration – temporary and long term, domestic and cross-border – is becoming an increasingly common choice among Lao workers. Within the country, short-term migration is common for both men and women, who are usually hired as day laborers to work on farms in neighboring villages. Payment is done in cash or in kind (rice). Migration from rural to urban areas of the country is limited because of government restrictions but internal trafficking in human labor is a growing concern. This is especially so since men and, in particular, women and girls may first be taken from rural areas to the urban areas of Vientiane in the center and Savannakhet in the South, and then trafficked on across the border to Thailand.

Both seasonal and long term migration to Thailand for employment purposes is an established method for families, especially those living near border areas, to diversify income risk. However, until very recently out-migration from Lao PDR was illegal, and it was only in 2002 that a MOU was signed by the Lao and Thai Governments, permitting Lao nationals to migrate to Thailand for employment purposes. Given the very high percentage of young people in Lao (an estimated 40 percent or so are under the age of 15), the lack of wage employment opportunities inside the country and the demand for cheap labor in Thailand, this trend is poised to rise. Urban areas in Lao PDR receive the highest levels of remittance income (LECS II data), and this reflects their higher access to wage migration opportunities.

More girls and women migrate than boys and men

Based on the report by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and ILO, the migrating population in Khammouane, Savannakhet, and Champasack comprised approximately 7 percent of the total sample population, of which 56 percent are female and 44 percent are male. In the population age group 10-17 years, there were significantly more girls migrating than boys, with girls facing the highest risks of trafficking and labor exploitation. Another point that needs highlighting is that youth (18-35 years) made up 74 percent of the migrating population. (MoLSW/ILO, 2003).

The majority of migration is to Thailand

Among the migrating population in these three provinces, 80 percent migrated abroad while the rest migrated in-country. Savannakhet province had the highest percentage of people migrating abroad (88 percent), followed by Champasack province (72 percent) and Khammouane (45 percent). Among the total population migrating abroad, the majority (81 percent) went to Thailand, 9 percent to the United States, 8 percent to other bordering countries and 0.5 percent to Europe. Champasack province had the highest percentage (84 percent) of migrants to Thailand. Over 87 percent of those migrating to Thailand came from the lowest 20 percent quintile, and 84 percent are migrating from urban areas.

In addition, 74 percent of those migrating to Thailand did so during the last three years (2000-2003) while less than 5 percent migrated before the survey attempted to explore the benefits and conditions of those migrant workers in Thailand. Overall, more than half of the total migrating population (54 percent) to Thailand sent remittances to their families, while the remaining 46 percent never did. Forty-two percent of the age group 18-25 did not send home any remittances.

Heads of sample households were asked if they received any information on the livelihood of their household members currently working in Thailand and whether they could contact those household members in Thailand or not. Responses indicated that 67 percent of the migrating population had no problems and were satisfied with their working conditions, 3 percent were facing some problems and hardship, but up to 29 percent has not sent information back home since leaving.

Chapter 5

Access to Education

5.1. Overview

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 and gains have not necessarily been evenly distributed across the population and geographic areas. The improvements have been greater at higher levels of education as the stay-on rates for girls increased faster than for boys. In spite of this progress the speed is not sufficient to reach parity by 2015 and achieve the MDG target (NSC *et al*, 2006). Stark disparities persist between urban areas and rural areas, and between road accessible and non-accessible rural areas. The latter are home to a large number of poor ethnic minorities, and are the most disadvantaged and the most cut off from access to schools and educational services.

A significant proportion of children – especially girls and ethnic minority groups in remote areas – are out of school. Indeed, late school entry is common; some 60 percent of six-year olds in the 47 poorest districts are not enrolled (NGPES, 2004). A gender gap exists from early on, with the ratio of girls to boys widening in favor of boys in secondary and tertiary education. Nevertheless, strides have been made in closing the gender gap in urban areas but similar gains have not materialized for girls in rural areas, where the gap between urban women and rural women continues to widen. Illiteracy remains high for both girls and boys, limiting access to secondary and tertiary education. About 70 percent of pupils who start grade 1 reach grade 5, with the percentage of girls slightly exceeding that of boys. About 35 percent of students enroll in secondary education but only about 5 percent complete the full six years (Ibid). Vocational training opportunities are limited, and less than 2 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.

5.2. Literacy

There are more women than men who cannot read and write

Overall adult literacy in Lao PDR is lower for women (61 percent) than men (77 percent). While shrinking, the gender gap is still pronounced and youth literacy rates for 15 – 24 year olds is 75 percent for women compared to 83 percent for men (World Bank GenderStats, 2004), particularly among rural households, poor households and ethnic minorities. Figure 6 shows the disparities in female literacy by rural-urban area. Important gains were made in urban areas in the last two decades, with the gap between literate men and women quickly closing. These absolute gains have been largest for the poor, in particular poor urban females whose progress in the last few years exceeded that of boys (King and Van de Walle 2005).

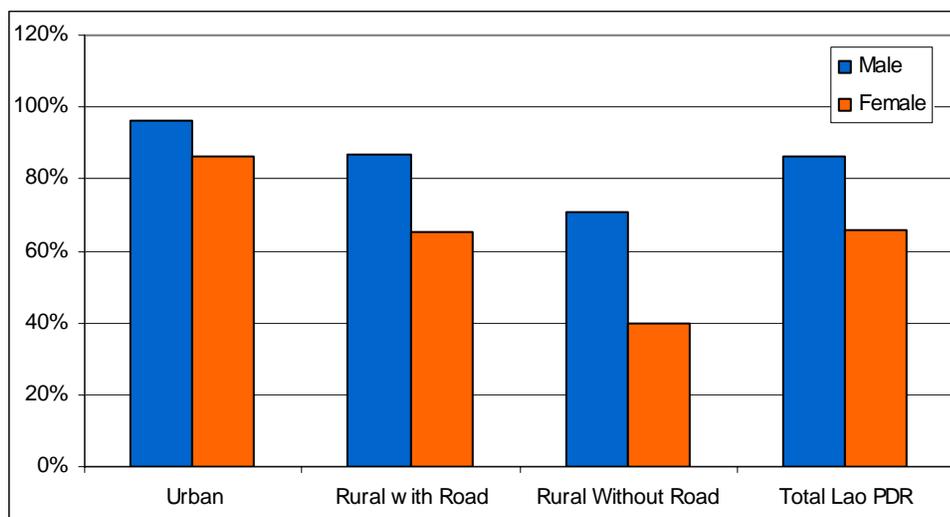


Figure 6: Estimation of Literacy Rate, Population Age 15+
 Source: King and Van de Walle 2005

However, even within urban groups, disparities remain; a larger proportion of the Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic group have attended school compared to other groups; within each of the ethno-linguistic groups, there are more men than women attending school; and although the urban poor have made important gains, this group still lags behind the non-poor.

Gender disparities in literacy are higher in the highland areas where a large number of ethnic minorities live. At 29 percent, the literacy rate for poor rural non Lao-Tai women is the lowest of all standing in sharp contrast to 66 percent for poor rural Lao-Tai women (King and Van de Walle, 2005). Indicators vary even among the various ethno-linguistic groups, with only 20 percent of Chine-Tibet women reporting they can read and write, a figure that is lower than the 29 percent quoted for the overall rural poor non Lao-Tai female population (Figure 7).

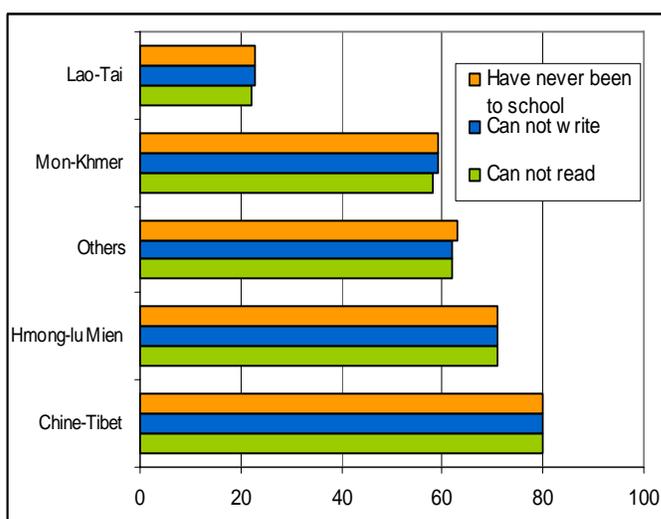


Figure 7: Illiteracy among female population >14 by ethnic group. Source: King and Van de Walle 2005

Illiteracy can be attributed to multiple causes

Causes of illiteracy among girls and women vary across provinces and among the different ethnic groups. Poverty, traditional beliefs, son preference, language, and remoteness are important factors. Others could be dropping out of school either due to household chores, early marriage or pregnancy. However, these low rates are ultimately a reflection of the obstacles facing ethnic minority groups in overall access to education.

5.3. School attendance³

Primary enrolment rates in Lao are among the lowest in East Asia, with the lowest rates being among ethnic minority girls living in rural areas

Table 5: Net primary enrollment rates in East Asia, 1990-2001

	Total		Male		Female	
	1990	2001	1990	2001	1990	2001
Laos	63	83	67	86	58	74
Cambodia	67	86	73	89	61	83
Malaysia	94	95	94	95	93	95
Thailand	76	86	77	87	75	85
Vietnam	90	94	94	98	86	92

Source: UNESCO 2003

Although progress has been made in the last 15 years (table 5), primary enrolment rates in Lao are among the lowest in East Asia. Lao PDR is also the only country where the gender gap has not closed significantly in the last decade. In fact, the gender gap in enrolment increased during this period. As with literacy, there are important rural-urban, regional, ethno-linguistic, and gender gaps (table 6). Eighty percent of villages have a primary school located in that area, out of which only 36 percent have complete primary schools (all 5 grades) (NSC 2005). The situation in the North region is of particular concern. Nation-wide, 90 percent of schools in the poorest districts are incomplete, and more than 40 percent of students attend an incomplete school (ibid).

The greatest progress in reducing the gender gap in primary enrollments has been for the Lao Tai where the gap has been eradicated in urban areas and reduced significantly in rural areas. Meanwhile, the lowest rates of primary school enrollment are among non-Lao Tai girls living in rural areas. There are notable differences among the various groups. For instance, among the Hmong-lu Mien in rural areas, 48 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school compared to 66 percent of boys. As for the Mon-Khmer, 57 percent and 61 percent of rural girls and boys are attending primary school. While the gender gap is smaller between men and women from the Chine-Tibet ethnic group, only 33 percent of girls and 39 percent of boy living in rural areas are enrolled in primary school. For all three non Lao-Tai groups, the gender gap in primary enrollment is lower in urban than in rural areas.

Table 6: Mean primary school enrollment rates (in %) for children aged 6 to 12 (2002/3)

Enrolment Rate	Urban		Rural	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Lao-Tai	90.4	91.9	82.1	80.7
Mon-Khmer	80.1	75.0	61.4	57.4
Hmong-lu Mien	87.8	84.5	66.0	48.3
Chine-Tibetan	86.5	100.0	38.7	32.7

Source: King and van de Walle 2005 based on LECS3

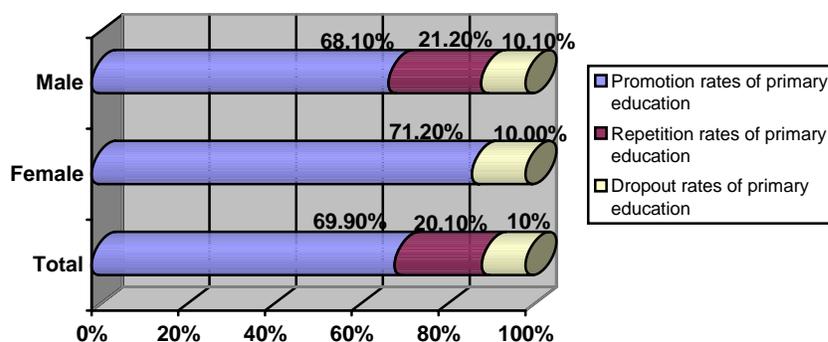
Note: All estimates are population weighted.

³ In Lao PDR, the educational sequence starts with five years of the primary cycle, followed by three years of lower-secondary school and three years of upper-secondary school.

Progression from the primary to the secondary cycle is difficult

In Lao PDR, many children do not make the transition from primary to secondary school, with approximately only half of those who begin primary school continuing into lower secondary. Less than half of those will enter upper secondary, and only a third of those will graduate. By the end of the fifth grade, large numbers of children below 12 years of age will have dropped out of primary school (King and Van de Walle 2005). In rural areas, more than 40 percent of all girls and 30 percent of all boys will have dropped out before the end of the fifth year. For non Lao-Tai students in rural areas, nearly 50 percent of them drop out at the end of primary school. Once in school, promotion rates for girls are slightly better than for boys (71 percent for girls compared to 68 percent for boys), (MoE, 2004) so gender gap is closing somewhat faster at higher levels. (NSC et al 2006)

Figure 8: Promotion, repetition and dropout rates in education, 2003-2004



Source: MOE, 2004

However, nationally, enrolment at lower secondary has remained especially low. Numbers indicate a secondary net enrolment rate for the 11-16 age group of 38 percent for males and 32 percent for females (UNESCO 2002/2003), a drop of 48 percent and 42 percent respectively from primary levels. While overall net lower secondary enrollment was 48 percent for urban students, net enrollment was only 25 percent for rural children. (ibid).

5.4. Obstacles to Schooling

A number of reasons interfere with Lao children attending school, be it at the primary or secondary level

According to the latest LECS 3 data, there are numerous reasons for not enrolling in school, both from the demand and supply sides. Poverty and lack of resources, compounded by the limited number and poor quality of schools render progression from primary to secondary school difficult. Oftentimes, families lack cash resources to buy school materials and uniforms. For instance, half of all costs related to primary school pertain to the purchase of uniforms, costing some poor families (namely ethnic families) up to 56 percent of household expenditures related to education. Textbooks constitute the second largest education-related expenditure in rural areas. The cost of transportation and meals, the lack of boarding facilities

and opportunity costs associated with older children not being available to work combine to make it often prohibitively expensive for families to let their children go to school.

Indeed, the need to work seems to be an important reason for not attending/dropping out of school, having been cited 35-40 percent of the time, for both urban and rural areas and across quintiles (GoL/NGPES 2004). The numbers were higher for girls than boys (42 percent versus 36 percent). Lack of interest – possibly related to the fact that educational opportunities do not necessarily translate into better prospects for the future – was also cited as a reason for dropping out of school, with thirty-one percent of boys and 24 percent of girls reporting dropping out of school.

From the supply side, distance from school was cited as a key reason, although much more for rural (20 percent) than urban children (7 percent), with three times more rural children than urban saying school is too far to attend (King and van de Walle 2005). More girls than boys say that distance from school was a reason that they dropped out after primary school (20 percent versus 16 percent). In rural areas, children from ethnic minority villages are the most affected by distance; only 4 percent of ethnic minority villages in rural areas say they have a lower secondary school locally, in contrast to 17 percent of rural Lao-Tai villages and 29 percent of urban Lao-Tai villages. Only 1 percent of ethnic minority villages in rural areas say they have an upper secondary school. The average distance to a lower secondary school for all Lao-Tai villages was 7.3 kilometers, versus 20.6 kilometers for a non Lao-Tai village. This distance is equally long for ethnic minorities living in both urban and rural areas, while the rural Lao-Tai are only about 2 kilometers further away from a lower secondary school than their urban counterparts.

Even when schools are accessible, facilities might be inadequate (Figure 9). For instance, only 25 percent of schools in poor rural areas have drinking water, and only 13 percent have toilets (King and Van de Walle, 2005). The latter is often cited as a reason why parents don't send their daughters to school. Moreover, since more than two-thirds of primary school teachers in rural areas are men, this may be a reason why parents opt not to send their daughters to school, given cultural attitudes. Many schools do not have boarding facilities, making it very difficult for children to attend school everyday due to long distances.

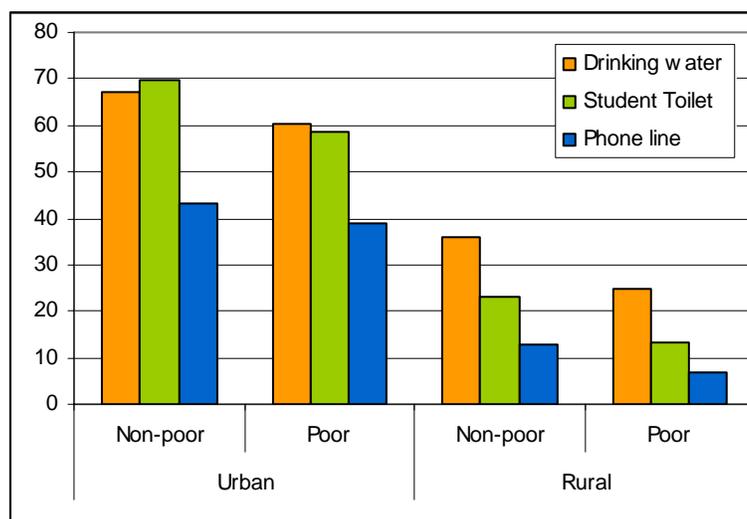


Figure 9: School facilities in Lao PDR

Source: King and Van De Walle, 2005

Poverty is a major determinant of who goes to school, for how long, and with what results.

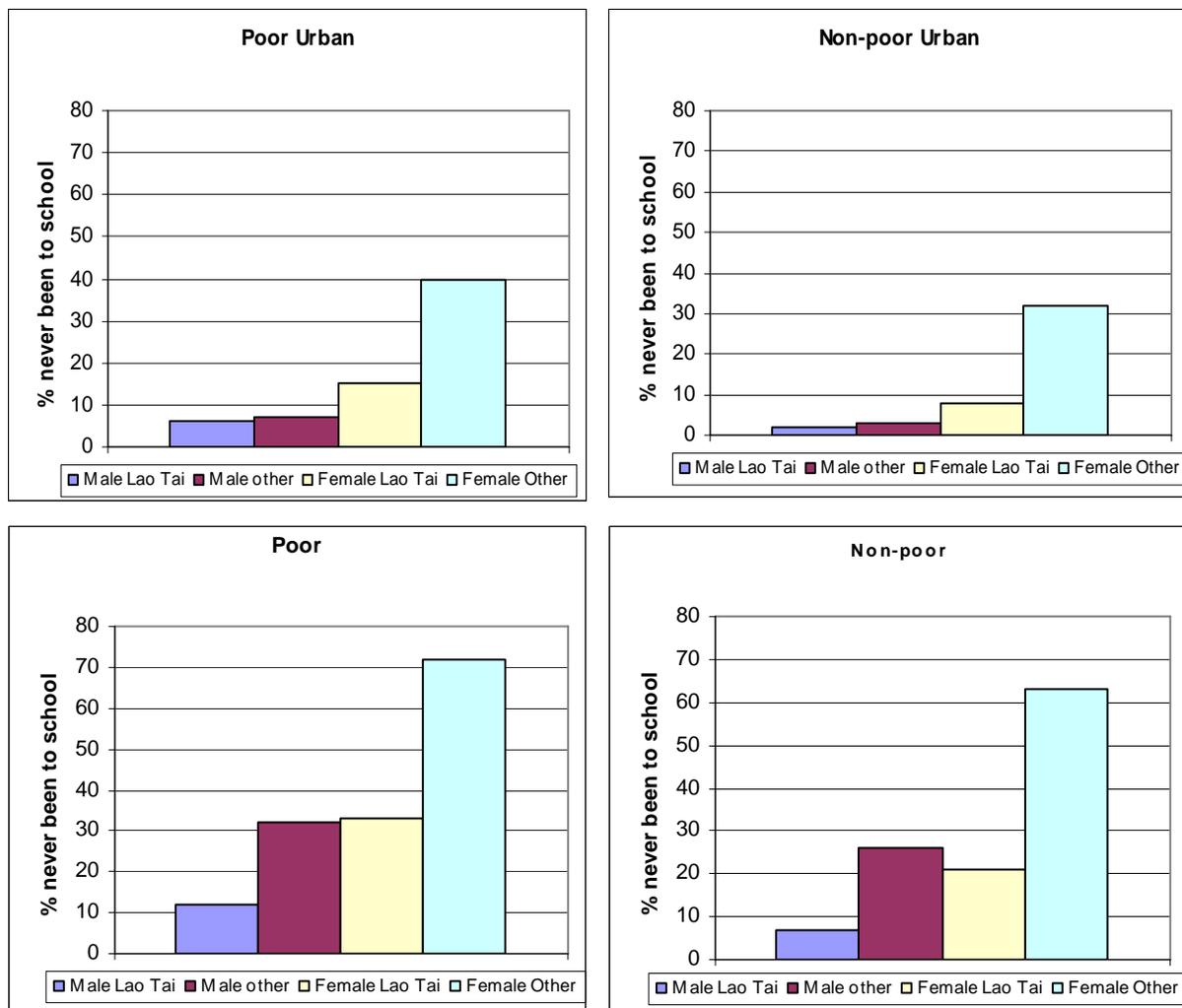
Almost 40 percent of the Lao population lives below the poverty line, and poverty is a major determinant of who goes to primary school, for how long, and with what results. The lack of educational access occurs within a range of economic and geographical contexts in the country,

ranging from low-income households to non-Lao language speaking groups, and rural peoples living in remote areas. These factors often converge in districts with a high concentration of ethnic minorities, where three out of five children age 6 are typically not in school.

Indeed, poor children are less likely to go to school than rich children, with studies showing that enrolment rates are positively correlated with household consumption (King and van de Walle 2005). Additionally, children from urban areas are more likely to go to school than those in rural areas (Figure 10). The probability of dropping out after fifth grade was found to be higher for girls than boys, for the poor than the non-poor, and for non Lao-Tai children in both urban and rural areas (King and van de Walle 2005).

Figures 10: Population aged 18 to 60 who have never been to school 2002/3

Source: King and Van de Walle 2005



While differences in access between the poorest districts and the less-poor districts are lessening, differences in quality appear to be widening.

Based on national school census data over the past five years, differences in access between the poorest and the less-poor districts are decreasing. However, differences in quality seem to be on the rise. While the proportion of trained teachers is rising steadily in the less-poor districts, it is falling in the poorest districts. Shortages of qualified teachers are acute in many districts, with approximately 20 percent of primary school teachers being unqualified to teach. Such shortages are also evident in access to teaching materials such as textbooks, with a ratio of one textbook per 2.3 pupils in the 47 poorest districts compared to one textbook per 1.5 pupils in the less-poor districts. Language access is also a serious barrier to school enrolment, with the result that ethnic minorities have much lower net enrolment rates and much higher dropout and repetition rates.

Box 7: The Government of Lao Education Policy

The Lao Constitution (2003) and the Education Law (2000) recognize the right of all citizens to education. They promote the principle of compulsory primary education and the development of education, with particular attention to different ethnic groups, women, the poorest, and both disabled and talented children. The Education Law provides for a range of decrees and instructions, most significant among these is the Education Strategic Plan 20 Years from 2001 to 2020. The Government has also ratified international agreements on and related to education, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, CEDAW, and CRC, and has agreed to the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

A recently developed set of guidelines for gender and ethnic equity in curriculum design and development has tried to establish an equitable balance. Based on the idea that education is a major determinant in poverty eradication and on the assumption that the people of Lao PDR must be literate and possess the knowledge to adopt modern agricultural methods and other skills and to be able to meet international competition and standards, a special effort will be made to further realize the social and cultural requirements of all ethnic groups so that the education system promotes equality. An improved education system will ensure girls and boys will have equal chances to succeed. The Government's goals for education and training include the following:

- Universalization of the quality of basic education at the primary level and continued expansion of participation at lower secondary level, ensuring that all people have the opportunity to apply their education to serve the socio-economic program;
- Eradication of illiteracy, thus providing poor people with a means of helping to improve their quality of life;
- Expansion of vocational, technical and higher education to meet the demands of the new labor market and to improve economic rates of return on human capital investment;
- Training of skilled workers, technicians, professionals, and intellectuals to have the capacity to apply modern science and technology to serve development needs; and
- Gradual improvement of the quality of national education to international standards.

5.5. Government Action

Basic Education for All is a goal of the Government of Lao

The Government is addressing the issue of illiteracy and the existing gender disparities in the education sector through its Plan of Action for Basic Education for All (Box 7). The policy of

the Lao Government is “to eradicate illiteracy among multi-ethnic people nationwide.” In particular, emphasis is placed on females and educationally disadvantaged groups living in the remote areas that need basic education to resolve their daily problems. However, non-formal education efforts are hampered by the limited or a lack of non-formal education personnel, the shortage of textbooks and teachers’ guides for basic education and vocational training, among other things. Additionally, people are reluctant to learn because of underestimating the significance and usefulness of learning; poverty; and the need for many children to gain vocational skills to generate income.

The Ministry of Education has made efforts to mainstream gender into programs

Of the key sector ministries, the Ministry of Education has made the most advances in mainstreaming gender into its programs. A central program has been the *Girls’ Basic Education Program* that targets primary education for ethnic minority girls, which is supported by the ADB. The Ministry has also targeted women in its non-formal vocational training program, supported by the German agency GTZ (BAFIS project). Since women form the majority of the population with little or no formal education, the non-formal approach (which was new to Lao PDR at the time of the project’s first phase in 1998) is an important step towards gender equality in the field of professional education and training.

With 51 percent of female students across all training programs, the project has surpassed its own target of 40 percent female participation. BAFIS has opened occupational fields traditionally restricted by sex to both women and men. To date, at least 10 percent of the participants in dressmaking or food processing training are men, and girls make up 10 percent of each carpentry or construction course. Female trainers constitute 61 percent of the non-formal trainer corps. Although they are predominant in the traditionally women-dominated training domains like sewing, weaving, food processing, tourism services, etc., female trainers have also worked their way into livestock farming and agro-agriculture, while some male teachers have acquired trainer qualifications in dress-making.

Chapter 6 Access to Health Care

6.1. Overview

In health, Lao has made progress over the past 10-15 years in reducing infant mortality rates, decreasing the prevalence of underweight children, and increasing the number of children who are immunized. Both the population with safe water, and with sanitation has risen, but the urban-rural gap remains wide. 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. Like in education, access to health services decreases dramatically as one moves outside urban areas, with the gap widening between rural and hard-to-reach rural areas. Again, as in education, this situation particularly affects ethnic groups that tend to be concentrated in remote areas, including women who bear the responsibility of the family's health care and whose reproductive health is critical.

6.2. Reproductive and Child Health

Maternal mortality rates are strikingly high, with large rural-urban disparities

Estimated at 530 deaths per 100,000 live births, maternal mortality rates (MMR) are strikingly high in the Lao PDR (UN 2004). There is a large disparity in this rate between urban and rural areas, at 170 versus 580 respectively. This dramatic gap may be related to the high rate of home deliveries without medical assistance in rural areas, which is also a cause of child mortality (Table 9). According to the data, almost 90 percent of rural women deliver at home, compared to approximately a quarter of urban women. Although high in all three highland, midland, and lowland rural areas, the rate of deliveries at home are highest among highland women, at 87 percent.

Table 9: Place of delivery by ethnicity (%)

Place of Delivery	Lao Tai	Other Ethnic Group
District or provincial hospital	10.9	3.9
Health centre	0.6	0.4
Private clinic	0.2	0.1
At home with medical staff	10.2	3.4
At home with traditional attendant	16.8	8.4
At home with friends	55.0	70.9
At home without help	6.0	9.7
Other	1.0	3.1

Source: Primary Health Care Expansion Survey, 1999

Important differences exist between Lao Tai and other women in terms of place of delivery, including for cultural and economic reasons

Home deliveries are common among all four main ethno-linguistic groups, although higher rates are found for the Mon-Khmer and Chine-Tibet (90 percent). The data on women aged 15-49 suggest that Ethnic Lao made greater use of district and provincial hospitals as a location of giving birth than did ethnic minority groups. Ethnic groups were more likely to give birth at

home with the support of family or friends or with no help at all. Eighty-five percent of Hmong women deliver at home compared to 63 percent of Lao-Tai women .

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. For instance, based on a traditional practice, a number of Mon-Khmer women deliver neither in the home nor in a medical center, but rather in the forest (ADB/PPA 2001). Poverty headcount also makes a difference. A reported 35 percent of women living in non-poor villages give birth in hospitals, compared to 15 percent of women living in poor villages who give birth either at home or elsewhere other than a hospital.⁴ Twenty four out of 25 Mon-Khmer mothers still deliver at home. (NSC et al, 2006)

Delivery in the home is of particular concern for poor, rural women because they lack the basic sanitary conditions needed for safe delivery. Chine-Tibet women appear to be most at risk during child birth since they are both very likely to give birth outside of a hospital, and a large majority of Chine-Tibet villages (76 percent) lack even safe water, let alone access to other sanitary measures. Access to pre and post-natal health facilities as well as improved access to sanitation and potable water are key to improving maternal mortality rates (NSC *et al*, 2006).

While high, infant and child mortality rates are decreasing due to the availability of vaccines

Between 1995 and 2004, the infant mortality rate (IMR) decreased from 104 to 65 per 1000 live births (World Bank GenderStats). This improvement is attributed to the availability of vaccinations to children under five. According to the Ministry of Health, more than 60 percent of those under age five are receiving vaccination against common childhood diseases (MOH, 2001). Almost all of the villages in Lao have now been covered by the immunization programs however, these are not succeeding in delivering full immunization to the many children, especially in remote communities (NCS et al 2006). Anti-malaria programs have been carried out in three in four villages and an increasing number of households are using mosquito nets as protection as a result the death rate associated with malaria in 2004 was only one tenth of that in 1994 (ibid).

Age at first marriage and level of education influenced health outcomes

Age at first marriage is closely linked to changes in men and women's economic, social, and educational opportunities. There is little difference between the average age at first marriage in rural and urban areas. In general, women who live in rural areas marry approximately one year earlier than women in urban areas, and rural men marry approximately two years earlier than their counterparts in urban areas. While small, this difference affects the level of education of people, especially that of girls. This is particularly important as data show that the higher a mother's level of education, the lower the infant and under-five mortality rate (Figure 15).

⁴ These figures are based on information provided by the village head (usually male) for 2002/3 LECS. The Health section of the Village Questionnaire of LECS III asked, "Where do most women in this village give birth".

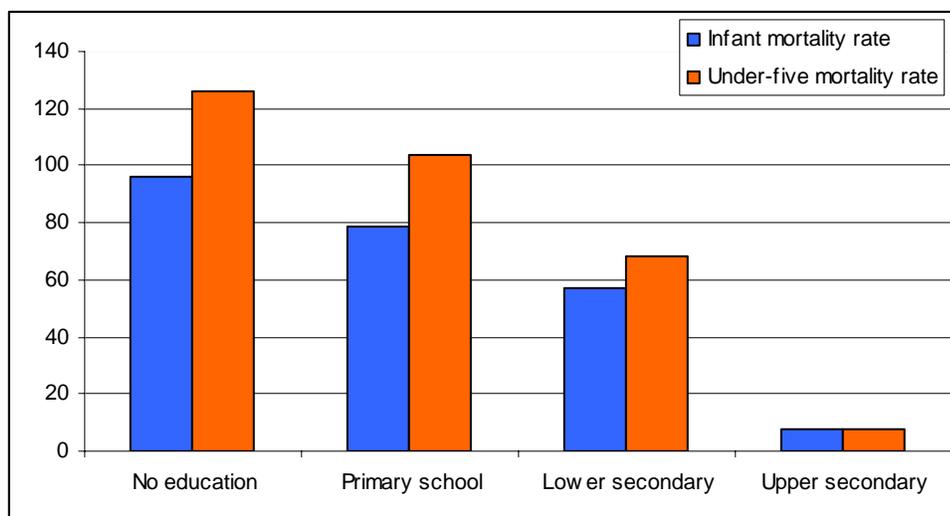


Figure 11: Infant and under-five mortality rates per 1,000 live births by mother's education
 Source: National Health Survey, 2001

In 1995, the Fertility and Birth Spacing Survey concluded that age at first marriage and at first birth seem to be moving down. The current generation of 15-24 years old are marrying and starting families at a younger age than older generations. In the future, it will be important to monitor this gender indicator (age of first marriage) in order to measure fertility rates, maternal mortality rates, and birth spacing. The decline of the fertility rate from 7.1 percent in the 1990s, to 5.6 percent in 1995, and 4.7 percent in 2003 is an indication that people are aware of birth spacing/family planning methods (NSC, 2005). However, progress is uneven across ethnic groups and regions. Relative to village size, ethnic minorities have 40 to 50 percent higher number of newborns than the Lao-Tai. (NSC *et al* 2006)

The family planning/birth spacing, safe motherhood and child care programs in the provinces, districts and villages, are covering about 203,436 Lao women and men. The Government has established a safe motherhood, child care and birth-spacing program in order to reduce maternal mortality, infant and child morbidity and mortality by 25 percent. Men are also being sensitized to family planning. While there are no men who have been sterilized, about 337 women were sterilized in 2002. Research done by the Ministry of Health found that in 2002, out of 203,436 people, 17,482 men (8.5 percent) were using condoms, 94,898 (47 percent) women were using contraceptives/tablets, 69,123 (34 percent) received contraceptives in the form of injections and 21,587 had loops.

6.3. Access to Health Care Services

Access to health services remains a key challenge, particularly in remote rural areas

As mentioned above, health indicators in Lao PDR are among the lowest in the region, with high child and

Box 8: Women, information and health among ethnic groups

For the Lao-Tai, data collected for the Lue subgroup revealed that the rate of infant mortality among this ethnic population was lower because mothers knew how and where to seek treatment. Because medical practitioners, especially nurses, lived within the villages, the Lue received regular health education, especially regarding safe child rearing. People must be adequately informed if they are to take advantage of existing health services, and greater efforts are needed to provide more health information to members of ethnic minority communities (RTI, 2000)

maternal mortality rates. Within these rates, there are wide rural-urban disparities that are associated with the scarcity of health centers and personnel in rural areas, and the difficulty in accessing the health centers exist due to long distances, geographic remoteness, and poor infrastructure.

The country's geography in great part defines access to health facilities, especially during the rainy season. According to the 2005 National Census, only about 8 percent of the villages had their own health center. Data from LECS3 suggest that it takes an average of 92 minutes to access a health facility in Lao PDR, with the range going from 108 minutes for rural residents to 19 minutes for urban ones. Similarly, it takes 3 hours to reach a health facility in the highlands compared to an average of 48 minutes in the lowland areas. As illustrated in table 7, in rural areas without access to roads, 20 percent of the population has 8 or more hours to get to the nearest hospital, and only 30 percent has access to a pharmacy in the village (LECS 3, 2003). About 15 per cent of those with temporary health problems sought treatment at health facilities or providers, with a variation of 20 percent in urban areas to 10 percent in rural areas without access to road. In some provinces, difficulty getting to the facility or provider was an important reason for not seeking help.

Table 7: Access to health services in villages

<i>kilometers</i>	% of people by distance to nearest hospital			% of people by distance to nearest health center			% of people having 8+ hours to:	
	≤10	11-30	31	≤10	11-30	31	Nearest hospital	Nearest health center
Lao PDR	54	31	15	78	17	5	5	3
Urban	94	6	0	100	0	0	0	0
Rural with road	47	39	14	76	21	3	1	1
Rural without road	28	37	35	56	27	16	20	11

Source: LECS 3

Given that the highland areas are mainly inhabited by the non Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic groups, these numbers suggest that the health access of these groups is limited. The difficulty in reaching a health care site was cited as a reason why many women of all four groups did not seek treatment, with the highest percent of women being from the Chine-Tibet group (38 percent) (LECS3). Additionally, more women than men cited this reason, at least among this group.

Table 8: Access to health services by province and region in 2002/03.

	Per cent of population with access in village to:						
	Pharmacy	Licensed pharmacy	Medical kit	Midwife	Traditional practice	Health volunteer	Medical staff as caretaker
Lao PDR	30	26	37	54	44	59	36
Urban	62	60	21	41	40	40	81
Rural with road	26	20	43	64	48	67	28
Rural without road	10	6	36	37	37	54	12

Source: LECS 3

Adding to this constraint is the financial aspect of health access and treatment, which involves the cost of transport and medical costs. Borrowing and selling assets or possessions to cover medical costs is a common occurrence, more so among women than men. Among the Lao Tai, 8 percent more women than men incurred financial risks in relation to seeking health care. Reasons for this difference in behavior might be related to the higher use of health services among women than men, possibly because of women's reproductive health care needs.

Among the Lao-Tai and Mon-Khmer, women utilize both modern and traditional health services about one-third more times than men. The utilization rate of health services is only slightly higher for Hmong-Iu Mien women than men, although the Hmong-Iu Mien as a whole seek treatment less frequently than either the Lao-Tai or Mon-Khmer. Lao-Tai and Mon-Khmer women are hospitalized slightly more frequently than men, while Hmong women and men have almost equal numbers of annual hospital stays. This situation is particularly difficult for women, who are not only responsible for their own but also their families' healthcare. In addition, higher qualified staff tends to be concentrated in urban areas.

The quality of health care, traditional perceptions, and language barriers influence health seeking behaviors and demand for health services, particularly among ethnic minorities

**Box 9: Health-Seeking Behavior
Among Ethnic Minority Groups**

Among the Bru Makong (Mon-Khmer), spiritual (animal) sacrifice was the first treatment option because of lack of ready access to health services. Formal medical treatment was applied only in the case of severe illness. The distance between the village and the health facility was the main constraint facing the Makong people, although poverty also prevented many from seeking medical treatment. Among the Hmong-Yao, the data collected indicated that traditional treatment was the first choice because the majority of the elders (mostly women) were experienced at preparing herbal remedies. The 1999 Primary Health Expansion Survey suggests that money often limits seeking health care among ethnic minority households.

General perceptions of health among ethnic minority populations revolve around animistic ideas, social customs, environmental concerns, and traditional practices. Animistic beliefs exist among all ethnic groups in Lao PDR and are closely related to ideas concerning health, welfare, and disease. These beliefs vary in intensity among ethnic groups and even among various households in the same village. Factors influencing health perceptions also vary by age, education, gender, socio-economic status, geographical settlement, culture and traditions (Box 9).

In rural areas in particular, the quality of health care provided is often not very high, which can affect the demand for health services. Although efforts are made to accommodate linguistic differences, including through the utilization of voluntary community health workers, communication

problems due to language barriers still exist since most doctors do not understand ethnic languages. Few ethnic minority medical personnel are being trained, which in the long term can affect the level of health service provided to ethnic groups. Moreover, recent data show that among ethnic groups there is a relationship between demand for medicine and the level of trust/knowledge related to it (LECS 3).

6.4. National Health Priorities

National health priorities are articulated in a number of strategies

Lao PDR has several documents that articulate priorities in the health sector. One of those, the “Health Strategy to the Year 2020” has four basic concepts:

- full health care service coverage and health care service equity;
- development of early integrated health care services;
- demand-based health care services; and
- self-reliant health services.

The country’s NGPES, focused on poverty and the 47 poorest districts, also prioritizes health, including expanding the service network for the health promotion of the people in rural areas, improving and upgrading the capacity of health workers from village to postgraduate level with an emphasis on ethnic minority health workers, ensuring an appropriate gender balance, and providing incentives for retaining health workers where there are shortages. Among other things, the strategy also emphasizes promoting maternal and child health in rural areas.

Chapter 7: Special Vulnerabilities

7.1. Overview

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 – be it physical or mental – particularly within the household, but few have legal or psychological recourse. Finally, 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.

7.2. Migration and Trafficking in persons

As migration increases, so too do the risks of trafficking

Driven by poverty and lack of employment opportunities at home, migration is becoming an increasingly common choice among Lao workers. Indeed, many young Lao people migrate to neighboring countries to search for work. Some do it legally others illegally, sometimes with the help of outsiders, parents or professional traffickers/smugglers. For many Lao villagers, especially those living near borders, migrating to neighboring countries provides them and their families with opportunities to work and earn income. It also gives them financial security and hope for the future.

Unfortunately, young people sometimes end up being trafficked, falling prey to people who take advantage of their poverty and ignorance. Trafficking in persons is an act of violence. It implies forcing people to enter into another country, legally or illegally, by force and without the knowledge or consent of the trafficked person with the purpose of exploiting them. The United Nations Protocol, which supplements the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime that was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2000, defines the Trafficking in Persons as:

- *The recruitment, transportation, transfer, labouing or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, or abduction, or fraud, or deception, or the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits without the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation’. ‘Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs’;*

Trafficking in persons became an issue in Lao PDR just recently. Currently, there are several organizations working on the plight of the trafficked persons, including the LWU, the Lao Youth Union, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, and the Gender Development Group (GDG). However, the lack of or limited data make it difficult for the Government to intervene effectively. In 2001, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, in coordination with Norwegian Church Aid, managed to secure the return of 21 Lao girls working in Thailand. However, it was not easy to resettle the returnees because of a lack of readiness and ability to rehabilitate them. Moreover, the situation created problems with the girls' families, who were not ready to have them back. Some of the girls went back to Thailand; others went to Vientiane in search of jobs. Additionally, in collaboration with the GOL, the ILO-IPEC Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women was launched in May 2000 in Khammouane, Savannakhet and Champasack provinces.

7.3. HIV/AIDS

While low, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is on the increase

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Lao PDR is estimated at 0.5 percent, which is very low compared to the neighboring countries (NCCA, 2003). The country's first HIV positive and first AIDS case were reported in 1990 and 1992, respectively. About 1094 people were infected with HIV/AIDS in Lao PDR, and about 227 are AIDS positive in 2003 (UNAIDS, 2003). The eradication of HIV/AIDS is one of the Government's eight objectives for poverty alleviation. (NGPES, 2004).

As illustrated in Table 10, the trend in HIV/AIDS prevalence among females is on the increase (NCCA, 2003), with the percentage of HIV-infected women increasing by an average of 8 percent/year. In 1995, women made up 33 percent of the total number of newly infected people while the percentage estimated in the first half of 2003 was 60 percent. A parallel increase was observed in the number of AIDS-affected women.

Table 10: Percentage of HIV infected and AIDS affected people

Year	HIV Infected people			AIDS Affected people						
	Total	Men	%	Women	%	total	men	%	women	%
1995	33	22	66.6	11	33.3	24	17	70.8	7	29.1
2002	187	112	59.8	75	40.1	85	52	61.1	33	38.8
June 2003	60	24	40.0	36	60	39	17	43.5	22	56.4

Source: NCCA, 2003

Part of the reason for the increase can be attributed to people's lack of awareness and knowledge of HIV/AIDS, although there is greater openness among people to talk about the disease. According to one study, while there is a greater degree of awareness, there is little knowledge of the disease (PSI 2002). For instance, 23 percent of respondents did not know that HIV was transmissible by blood. Over half did not know that it could be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy and breast-feeding. Additionally, in terms of prevention, almost a third of sexually active respondents reported not using condoms.

For numerous reasons, women are especially vulnerable to the disease

Research conducted in 2000-2001 in three provinces indicates that women service workers in entertainment places were the most vulnerable to contracting the disease, with 0.9 percent of women in this category being HIV positive. Only 22 percent of women in this sector reported protecting themselves with the use of condoms. In addition to female service workers, mobile groups such as drivers, the police, military personnel and migrant workers are also considered vulnerable as they are the most likely to engage in unsafe sex. Poverty, ignorance, sexual exploitation, trafficking of persons and migration in search of work or business makes women and girls especially vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Women's low status, lack of decision-making power and economic dependence – especially of married women – makes it difficult for them to challenge their husbands' extra-marital affairs or insist on condom use. Culture and tradition are also a hindrance to safe sex.

The Government of Lao PDR is making a concerted effort to prevent the spreading of the disease

The Lao Government has developed a National Strategic Framework and National Action plan (2002-2005) for its HIV/AIDS National Program, which is coordinated by the National Committee for Control of AIDS Bureau (NCCAB). In December 2001, the Ministry of Health issued a policy concerning HIV/AIDS/STD to prevent the spreading of HIV infections. The Government has established peer education, life skills training and other behavioral-changing activities. Supported by UNAIDS, the HIV/AIDS Trust was established to mobilize and coordinate the decentralization of resources to the provinces and various sectors, and building their capacities. Additionally, the Minister of Health has strongly called for the development of more integrated approaches, particularly to maternal and child health and immunization services; the development of more decentralized methods of delivering services; and the development of a unified and simplified health information system.

7.4. Violence against Women

Research shows that violence against women (VAW) is a common occurrence in Lao PDR

According to a survey carried out in 2003, of approximately 1000 Lao women (GDG 2003), 35 percent had experienced mental violence, 17 percent physical violence, and fifteen women (or 1.6 percent) sexual violence from their husbands. Nineteen women (or 1.9 percent) responded that the abuse continued while they were pregnant. Twenty-five per cent of those abused received physical injuries. Fourteen out of 57 cases were injured enough to require medical treatment, and six women were beaten to unconsciousness. In addition to physical injuries, there is also considerable impact on the mental health of the women.

While over half of the victims of violence in this survey reported that they left their homes because of the violence – mainly because they could no longer endure it – nearly all of those same women, returned to their husbands. In cases of domestic violence, when the woman has sought assistance, be it from family members or from village leaders, commonly the women have been counseled to stay with their husband, to discuss their roles and responsibilities and try to improve the relationships with their husband. This shows the weight placed on Lao women to marry and to remain married, no matter the circumstances.

In Lao society, the issue is rarely spoken of and rarely reported by women, particularly cases of sexual violence. This reflects the social values and perceptions of the many that believe that sexual harassment is not a serious issue. Among young people, 53 percent – among whom 63 percent girls and 45 percent boys – agree that it is okay for a man to hit his wife if she makes mistakes (Listening to the Voice of Young People 1998). Moreover, violent behavior between spouses is perceived as an internal family matter as long as no serious harm is done to the victim, who usually happens to be a woman.

This attitude is also present in the Penal Law (1992), which does not specifically address domestic violence but states that exemption from penal liabilities might be granted (Article 22) in case of physical or violence between close relatives without serious injuries or physical damages, libel, slander, insults, or outrage:

- *In case infractions are not dangerous for society and if the damaged party does not lodge any complaint, no judgment may be brought: physical violence between close relatives without serious injuries or physical damages, libels, slanders, insults, outrages to the body or the reputation of the dead, infractions to properties of close relatives, violation of domicile and private secrecy.*

The concept and understanding of violence against women is still very low

Law enforcement agencies such as the police, the magistrates and health workers are not fully aware of the issue of violence against women. Many cases of VAW are neither reported nor recorded or researched. Indeed, according to one survey sampling 2,399 households in 3 Provinces and Vientiane, only half of households where women had experienced sexual violence within a 12-months period (15 out of 29) reported the incidents; 11 women reported the incident to the village authorities, 2 to the police, and 2 to the courts (GRID, 1998). This shows the important role of village authorities, since most women go to them in cases of violence. Recent data related to women's participation in village committees shows that mediation committees – of which a LWU representative is a member – are playing a significant role in dealing with such cases (GRID, 2003).

A number of efforts are underway to address the issue of VAW

For instance, the LWU has set up a Women's Consulting Office (WCO) under the Department of Women's Rights and Interests. From September 2002 to August 2003, the

WCO provided consulting services to 122 women. While their cases could be categorized as legal, health-related, and psychological, it was found out that in all three categories women came with complaints of rape, child sexual abuse, trafficking or prostitution, health consequences of rape, physical abuse, unwanted pregnancies and forced abortion. The WCO has provided assistance to women in a number of areas, including writing and lodging complaints in court, and following up and accompanying the women to the hospitals, providing victims with the necessary mental and physical support, and protecting them from the loss of self-esteem, confidence and dignity. However, there is a need for campaigns to raise awareness on the harm caused by VAW, and reach out to provinces and districts. Additionally, there is an urgent need to establish shelters for the victims.

7. 5. Drug Abuse

The burden of opium abuse is very heavy on women, particularly from poor ethnic groups

Opium addiction and abuse is common among poor ethnic groups. Of the total recorded 52,613 addicted people, 80 percent are men and 20 percent women (MOH, 2003). Opium addiction has the potential of producing negative effects on families. Addicted fathers or/and husbands are a liability to the family. Because of their addiction, sometimes households may face shortages in labor and rice yields. Women's burden and responsibilities increase as a result. If a woman becomes addicted, then things become even worse; the children become affected and sometimes they too become addicted, as they learn to smoke opium from their parents. Available data indicates that the production of opium – to which women contribute the majority of labor (62 percent) – declined since 1989 with Government intervention, and by the end of 2005, the Government announced that opium was no longer being grown in Lao PDR.

Chapter 8 Participation in Decision-Making

8.1. Overview

At 23 percent, Lao PDR has one of the highest proportions of women in national parliaments in the region (Figure 12). While notable, this is unfortunately not matched in other decision-making institutions. 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. Where efforts to arrive at a gender-balance are made, results are noteworthy, as is reflected in the high number of women in management positions at the Committee for Planning and Cooperation. Prevailing cultural values tend to disadvantage women in terms of their participation in politics and decision-making processes.

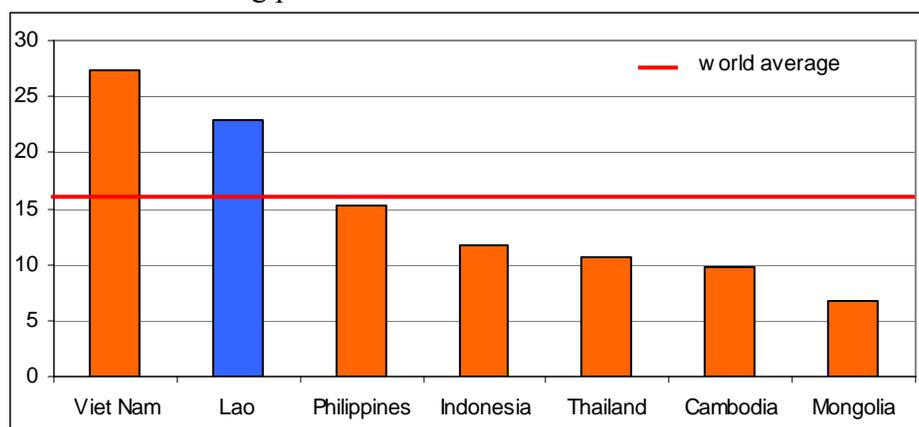


Figure 12: Women in lower house assemblies in East Asia (2005)

Source: IPU 2005

8.2. Women in the National Assembly

In Lao PDR, women are increasingly represented in the legislature

In political and administrative organization, the people of Lao PDR elect the national assembly, which has a five-year term. The President is the head of State and the main organ of the government is the Prime Minister's office. The government structure extends from the provincial level to the district and village levels, all of which have their division of responsibilities like the central ministries, except in the areas of national defence, foreign affairs, and police.

With the exception of the first legislature, Lao women have made gains in representation over the last 4 legislatures, with female representation hitting 20 percent in 1997 and 23 percent in their most recent elections (see Figure 13). Although high by regional and global standards, these rates are shy of the 50 percent representation targeted at the Beijing+5 conference. Female representation by province also varies widely, from 0

percent in Saysomboun to 50 percent in Xieng Khuang (Figure 14), highlighting the impact of cultural differences and perceptions across ethnic and geographic areas.

As for representation within the National Assembly (NA) Committees, there are more women members of the Social and Cultural Affairs than the Economics, Law and Security Committees. Within the NA Secretariat, 28 percent of staff are women. Available data also show that within the provincial National Assembly offices, there are only 24 women out of a total of 87 officers, and there no women in management positions.

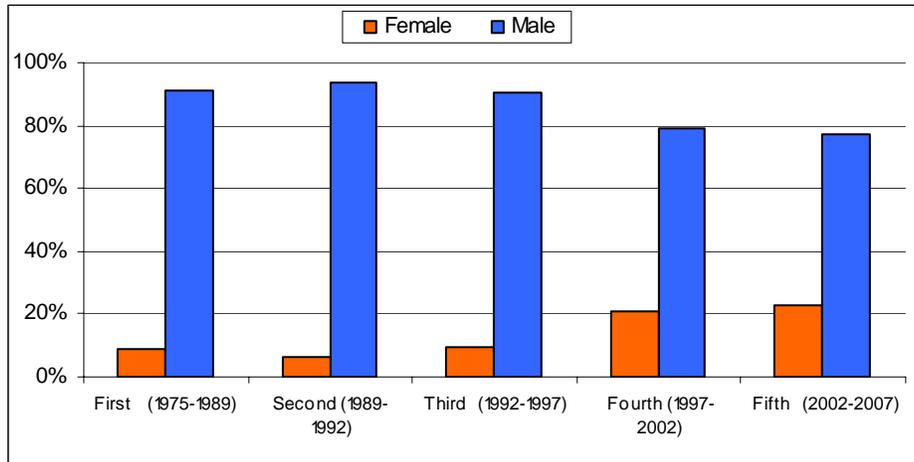


Figure 13: Gender Composition of the Lao National Assembly (last 5 legislatures)
 Source: (GRID, 2004)

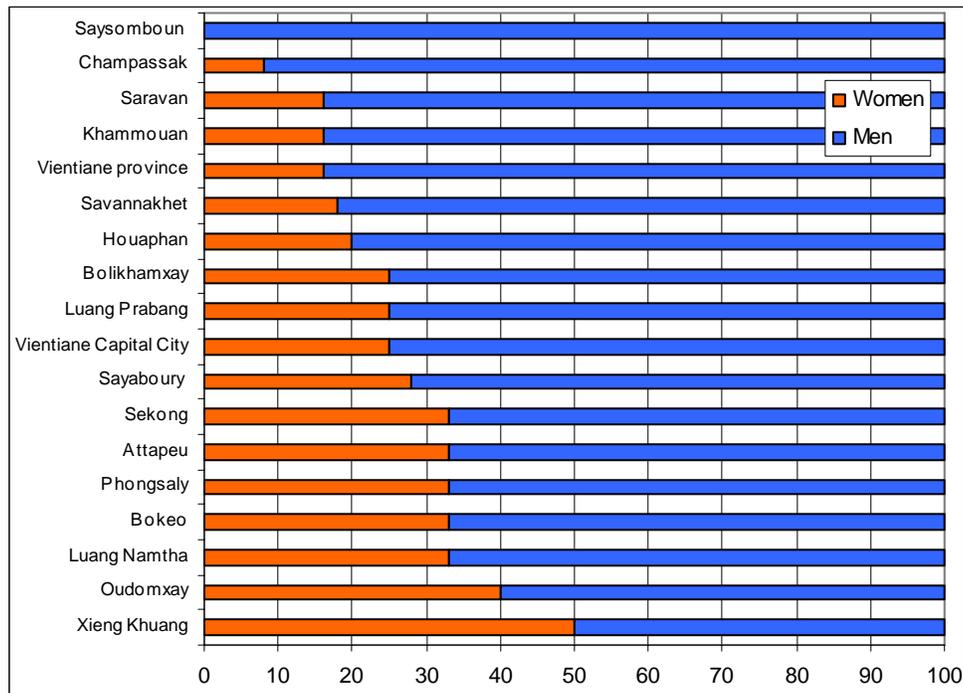


Figure 14: Gender composition of National Assembly by province
 Source: (GRID, 2004)

8.3. Women in government

Women are under-represented in senior government positions

As table x shows, there are few women in senior government positions. Presently, there are two women vice-ministers, and one woman governor. There are no women provincial and vice provincial governors, and there is one woman Provincial Departmental Director out of a total of twenty eight.

Table 11: Participation of Women and Men in Senior Government Positions (2004)

	Women	Men	Total
Ministers and Minister's-equivalent positions	2.7%	97.2%	100%
Vice-Ministers and equivalent positions	9%	91%	100%
Ambassadors	0%	100%	100%

Source: DOA, 2004

Very few women are present at the provincial and district levels

Table 12: Participation of women at the provincial and district levels (2004)

	Women	Men	Total
Provincial Governors	0	18	18
Vice-provincial Governors	0	18	18
District Governors	3	138	141
Vice-district Governors	2	179	181
Head of Provincial Cabinet	1	17	18
Deputy Head of Provincial Cabinet	0	55	55
Head of District Cabinet	0	141	141
Deputy Head of District Cabinet	2	211	213

Source: DOA, 2004

As table 12 shows, there are only 3 women district governors and 2 women vice-district governor in Lao PDR. This reflects the marginalization of women in politics and decision-making, and comes in sharp contrast to women's role at the National level as well as to their important economic contributions.

Even within village committees, women are practically absent. The administration units of a village include the village committee comprised of the village head and two deputies, the village elders committee (Lao Front for National Construction), and an economic committee, Village Lao Women's Union, Lao Youth Union, village police, militia, median committee, and other user's groups such as water user group, farmers' groups. Village level committees are also almost entirely male. A GRID pilot survey of women's participation in village-level decision-making conducted in Vientiane and three provinces revealed that aside from the village Lao Women's Union, there were very few women on any of the village level committees. The results of the survey are shown in the table 13.

Table 13: Membership of various village level committees by sex in 4 locations (out of 100 villages)

Name of committee	# villages with this committee	Total of Members		Male Members		Female Members	
		number	%	number	%	number	%
Village Comm.	93	302	100	278	92.1	24	7.9
Control Comm.	45	154	100	128	83.1	26	16.9
Mediation Comm.	93	472	100	392	83.1	80	16.9
Lao Youth Union	81	310	100	216	69.7	94	30.3
Lao Front for National Construction	98	400	100	352	88.0	48	12.0
Farmer's Group	27	117	100	103	88.0	14	12.0
Water User's Group	24	80	100	69	86.2	11	13.8
Total	461	1835	100	1538	83.8	297	16.2%

Source: NSC and LWU GRID Center, 1998.

As can be seen from the table above, the Youth Union, a mass organization for young people between the ages of 15 and 35 had the highest female membership at 30.3 percent. The Village Committee, which works with the village head to manage the administration of the village, has the lowest female membership. The same survey showed that leadership, including and heads of the above committees, was 96 percent male. The imbalance in participation of women and men extends to community meetings and information sharing as well, since these often involve only the “heads of household”, resulting in all-male meetings.

Chapter 9

Conclusions & Recommendations

9.1. Conclusions

The process of putting together the Lao Gender Profile brought to the surface the following gender issues and conclusions in Lao PDR:

- The process of sifting through the various documents and putting together the Profile highlighted the wealth of gender-related knowledge on Lao women but also the dearth of information and gender-disaggregated data in certain areas. For instance, while LECS 3 data have afforded this Profile insights by gender, ethnic group, rural-urban differences, there are few similar sources of information that provide a comprehensive picture of the situation of women in Lao PDR. Important information gaps remain in many sectors, including agriculture, health, labor, and economic participation, and call for greater gender-related research to be carried out in these areas.
- The GOL has demonstrated a strong commitment to gender equality and recognized the central role of women in the national and household economy. In this regard, it has taken several actions to buttress this commitment, including by putting in place a policy and strategic framework that is conducive to the promotion of gender equality.
- Nevertheless, Lao women still continue to be disadvantaged in their daily lives, be it in terms of accessing services and resources or because of the heavy burden that society places on them in assigning them responsibility for providing domestic labor and at the same time engaging in securing the livelihoods of their families. This difficult balancing act is often carried out under conditions of extreme hardship.
- Within this difficult context, ethnic women living in the remote rural highland areas are particularly disadvantaged. Not only do they live in isolated and underdeveloped areas, but they are also the ones that are most cut off from resources and services and the least able to participate in decision-making, partly due to illiteracy and cultural traditions.
- Women's economic participation both in the formal and informal sectors is growing, but requires that attention be paid to surfacing vulnerabilities as well as opportunities for career mobility.
- The reported literacy rates indicate significant gains in adult literacy in recent years, especially for the urban female population. However, they also highlight the stark urban and rural divide among women and the difficulties that rural women have in accessing education as well as the high opportunity cost associated with schooling.
- Health indicators are low throughout Lao but much more so in rural areas where access to health services is limited and long distances are often a deterrent to seeking medical help. Maternal mortality rates are dramatically high in rural and remote areas where women tend to deliver at home and neither benefit from pre nor post natal care.
- The prevailing cultural values tend to disadvantage women in terms of their participation in politics and decision-making processes;

9.2. Recommendations

1. Strengthening the development of gender information

This report highlights the big gap in gender information that exists in many areas and sectors, including the lack of sex dis-aggregated and gender-sensitive data and qualitative information. This creates difficulties in compiling an informative and reliable Gender profile that provides an accurate picture and analysis of the situation on the ground; hence the need to develop relevant quantitative and qualitative gender-sensitive information. Engendering the national statistics system is seen as a priority and has won support at the highest levels, through the Primer Minister's official Notification number 009, with new guidelines having been issued in 2004 to implement the Notification.

To this end, we propose:

- Further engender – to the extent possible – every future national survey;
- Processing and analyzing the LECS 3 gender-related data;
- Engendering surveys and research;
- Including some relevant new indicators to the existing (old) systematic data collection from the local level of the NSC system such as labor, access to credit, access to extension services, etc.

2. Enhancing knowledge of Government senior officials for gender mainstreaming

As per the NGPES, there is an urgent need to enhance senior officials' gender awareness and knowledge. The concept of 'gender' as a cross cutting issue is relatively new in Lao PDR. As a first step, the planners, economists, politicians, decision-makers at ministerial level need to be provided with deeper knowledge and skills to understand and carry out the gender mainstreaming process effectively. This would help promote more systematic considerations of gender concerns at the macro policy level, such as those related to decisions on the allocation of government expenditure (gender budgeting).

To this end, we propose:

- Continuing the dialogue on the national development strategies with senior leaders to agree on the development of gender strategies and gender action plans;
- Establishing an institutional framework and suitable mechanism for monitoring and evaluation;
- Building the capacity of LaoNCAW, LWU and GRID as well as that of sector/ministry Gender Focal Points/committees/working groups. This could be facilitated by donor support, and organized through training/workshops, experience-sharing within and outside the country;
- Adopting and adapting tools for gender mainstreaming to the local context or specific sector;
- Providing gender baseline data and updated information on sex dis-aggregation.

3. Targeting socio-economic development for the rural poor, especially poor Ethnic Minorities

As mentioned in the report, there are important rural-urban disparities that particularly affect ethnic minority women. For this reason it is strongly recommended that socio-economic development (planning and budgeting) target rural ethnic groups and minorities to reduce existing poverty and gender gaps. This would also greatly contribute to reducing their vulnerability as well as that of the rural poor in general, especially women and girls victims of trafficking.

To this end, we propose:

- Conducting research on each ethnic minority group before designing any community development project. The Lao Front for National Construction and the Youth Union should be involved in integrating rural development projects targeting the poorest villages and Ethnic Minorities.
- Supporting functional literacy classes, access to agricultural extension services, handicraft and marketing, activities for income generation opportunities, and the provision of credit. This support would come from both the government and international donors.

Additionally, development workers should consider the following priorities:

- **Agriculture.** Women should be recognized as farmers and provided with credit and training on new production techniques so that they can reduce their work burden and increase their labor productivity. Programs/projects should be sensitive to women's time constraints, which are in part determined by seasonal agricultural requirements and regional differences.
- **Education and vocational training.** Provide incentives to encourage female attendance and reduce girls' drop-out rates. Scholarships, school feeding programs, more local provision of schools and flexible timing are possible ways to encourage increased female enrollment and reduce drop out rates. This should be in the context of an overall drive to improve the coverage and quality of educational provision. Renewed efforts are needed to combat female illiteracy, possibly in the context of other local development efforts (e.g. in health or agriculture). These need to be sensitive to the multiple demands on women's time. More vocational training courses should be provided for female workers.
- **Health.** Support the development of appropriate health care programs that integrate nutrition, sanitation, education and preventive measures such as immunization. This should be prioritized over institution-based health care, which would be inaccessible to the majority of the population. Improving women's and children's health status, particularly ethnic minorities, should be a major priority within this. Other priorities include promoting an integrated approach to reproductive health, incorporating family planning, maternal and child health and HIV/AIDS prevention activities. Experience elsewhere has shown that men also need to be drawn into family planning and AIDS awareness activities for them to be effective.

4. Promoting SME Development

To this end, we propose:

- Improving the enabling policy and regulatory environment to enable women and men entrepreneurs to start and expand their enterprises. A National Micro and Small Enterprises Promotion Committee should be established, which would include LWU and NCAW representatives at the decision-making level.
- Mainstreaming gender equality into all aspects of SME development. It is strongly recommended that *Gender Focal Points* should be established at all levels (at national ministries, as well as in provinces and districts) to facilitate greater support for women's economic empowerment, income generation and enterprise development for women and men.
- Improving provision of and access to credit and financial services. Small-scale loan funds, flexible credit schemes and terms, and more adaptable banking procedures should be simplified and designed based on the different categories and needs of micro and small enterprises involved, including the specific needs of women and various disadvantaged groups. An SME Promotion Fund should be established, with women entrepreneurs and various disadvantaged groups as the priority target groups for these loan funds.
- Building the capacity of mass organizations like the LWU, Lao Youth Organization, Lao Trade Union and Lao Front for National Construction to enable them to promote good practices in micro-finance programs in semi-urban and rural areas.
- Making available training, advice and counseling to enable women entrepreneurs to understand financing mechanisms and procedures, and to assist them in preparing good quality feasibility studies and business plans that will be acceptable to the lending institutions.
- Enhancing information dissemination and networking. The dissemination of information on legal, regulatory and administrative procedures as well as business and market information on SMEs, should be the priority of government organizations involved in SME promotion.
- Disseminating information about existing sources of business training and credit, including in accessible form, to both female and male entrepreneurs.
- Encouraging and supporting female business groups/clubs/associations as well as networking with key business and development agencies to facilitate greater sharing of information and experience among SMEs at the local level.

5. Addressing issues of gender-based violence and trafficking in persons

Because many Lao people – especially women and children – feel uncomfortable discussing gender based violence, adequate measures are needed to raise the visibility of the problem in order for people to discuss it more openly and report such cases. This increase in visibility should take place for all forms of gender-based violence; domestic violence, rape, child abuse and trafficking, all of which should be given high priority by

government agencies. At the same time, increased visibility and public awareness should go hand in hand with the eradication of harmful traditional practices

To this end, we propose:

Legal measures

- Reviewing and/or enacting laws that define the various forms of gender-based violence as crimes;
- Taking appropriate measures to impose penalties and punishment, and other enforcement mechanisms to prevent and eradicate VAW.
- Adopting measures to protect and remove all forms of discrimination against women, and to empower women with disabilities, the girl-child, and old women.
- Introducing legal and administrative procedures for women and children subjected to violence, effective access to counseling, restitution, reparation and other forms of dispute resolution.
- Reviewing and reforming Penal laws and procedures applicable to cases of sexual offences to eliminate gender bias, and ensuring justice and fairness to both the victim and the accused.

Education, Training and Awareness raising

- Facilitating research on and documentation and dissemination of the causes, nature, prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence.
- Promoting gender awareness and training of all service providers such as the administrative staff of the Ministry of Justice, judicial officers, prosecutors, the police, prison officers, community and welfare workers as well as health officers and nurses.
- Facilitating networking to share and exchange information on best practices in combating gender based violence.

Provision of Services

- Strengthening the LWU's counseling services and providing accessible legal aid for the victims of gender-based violence.
- Developing integrated action plans for combating gender based violence and incorporating them into sectoral plans, as well as providing budget for their implementation.
- Making information on gender-based violence accessible to the public, especially women and children.
- Providing accessible, effective and responsive police, prosecutorial, health, social welfare and other services to redress cases of violence against women.

Trafficking in Persons

- To address the issue of trafficking in persons, building the capacity of unemployed youth – through the LWU and the Lao Youth Union – to understand the risks of being trafficked and of being an illegal immigrant or worker.
- Organizing capacity building and awareness-raising activities for the youth, parents and villagers at the national, provincial, village and grassroots levels on

- trafficking in persons and related problems such as being arrested and the dangers of contracting diseases such as HIV/AIDS.
- Supporting the victims in establishing alternative means of earning income such as weaving, cotton/corn/bean small-scale industries, buffalo/pig/chicken/duck raising; and providing them with veterinary and marketing services.
 - Facilitating self-employment, creating jobs and community development activities as well as providing credit for the youth so that they can generate income to support themselves and their families.
 - Organizing returnees into income-generation or skills-training groups and networks to share bad and good experiences, and lessons learned.
 - Providing counseling, rehabilitation and health services for victims of trafficking.
 - Facilitating the establishment of a network of organizations involved in anti-trafficking activities with a view to sharing and exchanging experiences and best strategies, and to cooperate.

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