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Country Gender Assessment for LAO PDR

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Reducing Vulnerability and
Increasing Opportunity

Executive Summary



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

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

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

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

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

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

ENDOWMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

AGENCY

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

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

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

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

EMERGING AREAS AND GROWING RISKS

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

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

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

CLIMATE CHANGE: Women's roles in climate mitigation and adaptation have been insufficiently supported to date. With unpredictable floods and drought and the Mekong River bordering the country's western corridor, Lao PDR is very vulnerable to the growing risks of climate change.³ The NSEDP has estimated a 1.1 percent negative impact on GDP from climate change due to associated risks.⁴ Women's traditional responsibilities in

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

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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



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Table 1: Summary of Recommendations

Endowments
Recommendation 1.1: Increase coverage and quality of health services, with a focus on remote areas, particularly in areas of maternal health, sexual and reproductive health, and nutrition, and with attention to demand-side issues and the role of men in maternal health-seeking behavior.
Recommendation 1.2: Improve access to education, through investments in rural schools and educational services, to reduce gender gaps, regional disparities, and gender stereotypes in secondary and tertiary education, vocational training, and adult female literacy.
Recommendation 1.3: Increase access to clean water and sanitation, especially in rural areas, while ensuring women's voice is reflected in design and maintenance.

Economic Opportunities
Recommendation 2.1: Pursue a labor-intensive growth strategy that expands wage labor opportunities for both women and men, especially in such emerging industries as tourism, garments, and food processing.
Recommendation 2.2: Expand women's access to and control over inputs for farm and non-farm enterprises, including finance, land, agricultural extension, and business training.
Recommendation 2.3: Improve gender mainstreaming in infrastructure investments, by expanding electricity access for female-headed households, and improving benefit-sharing and female participation in transport, hydropower, and mining operations.

Agency
Recommendation 3.1: Improve capacity and institutional support for gender mainstreaming machinery.
Recommendation 3.2: Support progress in women's representation in national and local government.
Recommendation 3.3: Reduce incidence of violence against women through legal reform efforts, and efforts to increase public awareness, and capacity of health, law enforcement and protective services.

Emerging Areas
Recommendation 4.1: Through regional fora such as the GMS Working Group on Human Resources Development and the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking, support regional policy dialogue on enhancing women's human capital base to gain opportunities and minimize risks from regional integration.
Recommendation 4.2: Improve outcomes for vulnerable migrant populations through legal reform, improved services, and strengthened anti-trafficking mechanisms.
Recommendation 4.3: Mainstream gender considerations into climate mitigation, adaptation actions and disaster planning, and ensure that women participate in related consultation and decision-making processes at local, regional and national levels.

Gender Mainstreaming
Recommendation 5.1: Use sex-disaggregated indicators and targets in planning, implementation, and monitoring, and strengthen capacity among GOL agencies in this area.
Recommendation 5.2: Analyze gender trends with a view to interaction with existing rural/urban, regional and ethnic disparities in the country.
