

ABOUT UN WOMEN

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

SITUATION OF WOMEN – OVERVIEW

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), a single party socialist republic, has a population of 6.25 million people, 80% of which lives in rural areas, while 60% is under 25 years of age. Lao PDR is a landlocked country, which creates another level of vulnerability as most trade must pass through Thailand. It is ranked 122 out of 169 countries in the Human Development Index (2011). Approximately 80% of its population lives in rural areas and about 70% live on less than USD 2 a day.

Lao PDR is the country with the largest number of unexploded ordinances in the world, which currently affects 25% of villages and poses a huge challenge to human security and to access to land for a population still largely dependent on subsistence agriculture. Classified as a least developed country, Lao PDR's recent record in improving living standards is impressive. Poverty rates have fallen from 46% in 1992 to 27.6% in 2008. However, ethnic and geographical inequalities persist with poverty proportions in the north at a 12 percentage points higher than in the centre or south. Lao PDR embraced economic reform in 1986, beginning to decentralize power and encourage private sector investment and integration with most of its neighbors in the Association of South East Asian

Nations. Mining and hydro-electric power are the biggest contributor to the Lao economy, followed by construction, trade and other services, including tourism, with expansion of food and non-food processing industries. The current economic boom, averaging 7.9% growth annually over the last five years, provides an opportunity to further eradicate poverty. The Government of Lao PDR is committed to removing the country from the ranks of LDCs by 2020.

Legal Frameworks and Structures for Gender Equality –

The Constitution (1991) guarantees equal rights for women and men and equal treatment before the law. A National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) was set up in 2003 to drive national policy to promote gender equality and empower women, previously under the Lao Women's Union. NCAW has developed its second *National Strategy on the Advancement of Women for 2011-2015*, which outlines how to translate political commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)ⁱ and other international agreements into practical actions, as well as integrate gender equality principles into national laws and policies. 'Sub-CAW' units were established throughout the country at all ministries, state organizations and at provincial, district and village levels, to enhance central policy-making and aid in monitoring CEDAW implementation.

The 2004 *Law on the Development and Protection of Women* focuses on eliminating discrimination against women, combating violence, and creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment. The *Family Code* has been amended to remove discrimination against women in matters of marriage and inheritance, repealing a lowering of the marriage age of girls to 15.

Poverty and food insecurity — The majority of women live in rural and ethnic minority communities. They are affected by poverty and food insecurity, given their central role in food collection and management. Lao women are traditionally responsible for collecting non-timber forest products, weeding and managing family food stores. This labour-intensive work exacts a heavy burden since women are primarily responsible for housework and child-rearing.

Migration — Lack of livelihood opportunities is pushing greater numbers of women, especially younger, rural

women, outside the country in search of work. Women constitute some 70% of the country's migrants, with many more who migrate via informal or illegal channels being unaccounted for. Sex-disaggregated data on migration is poor, but anecdotal evidence shows that increasing numbers of women are migrating to Thailand as undocumented workers in service and domestic sectors, vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.

Education – The high illiteracy rate among women, especially those in certain ethnic groups, and the persistent gap between literacy rates of men and women (89% for men and 78% for women aged 15-24) is a cause for concern. This is compounded by an inadequate educational infrastructure, and cultural attitudes that hinder girls' education and force them to drop out to assist in agricultural work or domestic chores. Women's ability to obtain non-agricultural employment, and participate in decision-making, is severely hampered by their low levels of education.

Violence against women – The prevalence of gender-based violence, especially domestic violence, is a widespread, although largely 'hidden' problem, with its underlying causes being weak or absent definitions and distinctions of violence in legislation (for example, the Penal Code does not address domestic violence or marital rape); a culture of silence and impunity; poor access to justice for women in rural, ethnic communities; and an absence of data and information on the incidence of violence and on the availability of services for survivors. Human trafficking is rising, especially among young women; 60% of victims are reportedly girls between 12-18 years. Against this backdrop, in 2010, the National Assembly took the lead in organizing a national consultation on VAW with members of the National Assembly and formed a working group for the development of a Domestic Violence Law.

Women's participation in decision-making – There has been a three-fold increase in women's representation in the National Assembly between 1990 and 2003, and the figure now stands at 25%, one of the highest rates in the regionⁱⁱ. However, despite the gains elsewhere, women remain poorly represented, including throughout the government administration and the judiciary. The CEDAW Committee noted in 2009, that it was cause for concern that 80% of the population lives in rural areas, where village councils and village chiefs handle everyday matters, yet just above 1% of village chiefs are women.ⁱⁱⁱ

UN WOMEN IN LAO PDR

Since 1993, UN Women has been supporting the Government of Lao PDR address national priorities for gender equality and women's empowerment. The current focus of support includes:

Engendering governance, leadership and law reform – UN Women has supported the government with gender responsive national planning, including helping the NCAW develop the National Strategy on Advancement of Women (NSAW) using CEDAW and rights-based principles as the framework. Further support is being provided to NCAW and the sub-CAWs for the implementation of the NSAW including capacity building for gender-responsive budgeting and establishing a data collection system for monitoring. UN Women is also supporting efforts to make laws gender-sensitive, focusing on their impact on marginalized groups of women—such as migrant workers, those from remote, ethnic dialect-speaking communities, and women living with HIV/AIDS. As part of the UN Joint Programme on Support to and Effective National Assembly (SELNA), UN Women is supporting the development of capacity for gender responsive review of laws and budgets in the National Assembly.

Promoting women's economic rights and security – UN Women has supported community-based women's groups and the Lao Women's Union, on 'safe migration' initiatives, such as providing financial literacy training and information to women migrant workers on their rights. With the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and the NCAW, UN Women is advocating for the development of a gender-sensitive policy on migration, with assistance going towards collection and analysis of much-needed sex-disaggregated data on labour migration. UN Women has also piloted empowerment of women handicraft producers and their communities through improving the value chain of community-based silk production and of bamboo handicraft.

Tackling violence against women – UN Women is supporting the Ministry of Justice and the NCAW on a comprehensive review of the Law on the Development and Protection of Women—particularly its provisions related to gender-based violence—with the aim of developing a National Law on Domestic Violence. Future efforts to complement the review will include conducting a survey among young people on attitudes towards violence against women, and exploring with other UN partners opportunities to gather research and sex-disaggregated data on the prevalence of domestic violence and trafficking, and develop national campaigns linked to the UN Secretary-General's 'UNiTE to End VAW' global campaign.

ⁱ Lao PDR was the second country in Southeast Asia to ratify the convention (in 1981). However, the initial state report was only presented to the CEDAW Committee almost 25 years later in 2005.

ⁱⁱ See [Inter-parliamentary Union](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.