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USAID/LAOS COUNTRY-LEVEL GENDER ANALYSIS

APRIL 13, 2022

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ACRONYMS

ADS	Automated Directives System
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADWLE	Association for Development of Women and Legal Education
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BPS	Business Pulse Survey
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEFM	Child, early and forced marriage
CSO	Civil society organization
CTIP	Counter Trafficking in Persons
DO	Development Objectives
DRG	Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
ESSDP	Education and Sports Sector Development Plan
ESP	Essential Service Packages
EVAW	Elimination of Violence Against Women
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FGD	Focus group discussions
FP	Family planning
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDA	Gender and Development Association
GESI	Gender equality and social inclusion
GEWE	Gender equality and women empowerment
GII	Gender Inequality Index

GITA	Gender Integration Technical Assistance
GPOC	Gender point of contact
GRB	Gender-responsive budgeting
GGG	Global gender gap
GOL	Government of Lao PDR
HCI	Human Capital Index
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
ILO	International Labor Organization
IR	Intermediate result
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex
LOE	Level of effort
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LSIS	Lao Social Indicator Survey
LSMP	Legal Sector Master Plan
LWU	Lao Women's Union
LYU	Lao Youth Union
MBD	Mother's brother's daughter
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MELS	Monitoring, evaluation, and learning strategies
MEM	Ministry of Energy and Mines
MSM	Men who have sex with men
MMR	Maternal mortality rate
MOES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MONRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MSME	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises

MW	Megawatts
NCAW	National Commission for the Advancement of Women
NCAWMC	National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children
NCDP	National Committee for Disabled Persons
NCMC	National Commission for Mothers and Children
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIU	National Implementation Unit
NPA	Non-profit Association
NPAGE	National Plan of Action on Gender Equality
NPAVAWVAC	National Plan of Action on Preventing and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Violence against Children
NS/ATD	National Secretariat/Anti-Trafficking Department
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NTFP	Non-timber Forest Products
ODOP	One District One Product
OVC	Orphans and vulnerable children
PAD	Project Appraisal Documents
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PEPFAR	President's Emergency Fund for AIDS relief
PRC	Republic of China
SABER SD	Survey Systems Approach for Better Education Results Service Delivery
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SF	Strategic Framework
SHE	Support Her Enterprise
SOW	Scope of Work
SRGBV	School-related gender-based violence
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SSC	SME Service Centre
STI	Sexually transmitted infections

STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SubCAW	Sub-committees for the Advancement of Women
TIP	Trafficking in persons
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UXO	Unexploded ordnance
VAW	Violence against women
VMA	Village Mediation Units
WASH	Water, sanitation, and hygiene
WEE	Women's economic empowerment
WEEE	Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act
WHO	World Health Organization
WFP	World Food Programme

KEY DEFINITIONS

Accessibility refers to the design, construction, development, and maintenance of facilities, information and communication technology, programs, and services so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them. Accessibility includes the provision of accommodations and modifications to ensure equal access to employment and participation in activities for people with disabilities, the reduction or elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers to equitable opportunities, a commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities can independently access every outward-facing and internal activity or electronic space, and the pursuit of best practices such as universal design.

Agency is the ability to make decisions and act upon them to achieve a desired outcome, free from violence, retribution, or fear.

Disability includes different impairments (e.g., visual, hearing, physical or mobility, and intellectual) as well as multidimensional and contextual factors that hinder participation.

Discrimination is any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference that prevents the ability to enjoy equal rights on an equal footing, such as treating someone differently specifically because of who they are or what they believe in.

Discriminatory social norms are norms that reinforce gendered identities based on stereotypes and determine power relations that constrain women's and men's behavior in ways that lead to inequality.¹

Diversity is the variety of similarities and differences among different groups and people that include, but are not limited to, the following: race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, disability, native or indigenous origin, age, generation, culture, religion, belief system, marital status, parental status, socioeconomic status, appearance, language and accent, education, geography, nationality, lived experience, job function, personality type, and thinking style. The aim is to value and incorporate the insights and perspectives that differences can bring to any intervention, sector, or activity.

Empowerment is a process and an outcome that includes building skills and self-confidence to increase self-reliance and agency.

Ethnicity stems from belonging to a social group that has shared ancestral origins and shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, and language.

Equality means providing each individual, or group of people, the same basic resources and opportunities (sometimes referenced as “a level playing field”).

Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances, and that different approaches, allocations, or resources may be needed to address disadvantages or inequalities in order to achieve equality in opportunities (creating a “level playing field”).

¹ UNDP. 2020. Tackling Social Norms: A Game Changer for Gender Inequalities. *2020 Human Development Perspectives*. New York, New York.

Gender refers to identities assigned to men and women that affect relationships and responsibilities. Unequal gender norms limit access to assets, information, services, and opportunities for both women and men. Societal and individual expectations about gender are learned and can and do change over time. These differ within and among cultures or social groups, and often intersect with other factors, such as race, class, age, and sexual orientation.

Gender analysis is a subset of socioeconomic analysis that is used to identify, understand, and explain gaps between males and females that exist in households, communities, and countries. It is a critical and systematic examination of differences in constraints and opportunities for advancing gender equality, based on sex, gender identity and power relations. Gender analysis is used to identify gender gaps in key domains, including gendered division of labor, access to and control over resources, assets, opportunities, and services, leadership roles and decision-making power. A gender analysis is a first step to designing gender-intentional programs and activities, leading to the identification and a better understanding of who may be included and excluded based on their sex or gender identity. It helps to mitigate potential differential impacts of development policies and programs on males and females, including unintended or negative consequences.²

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived biological sex, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity. This violence is typically characterized by the use or threat of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, legal, political, social, and other forms of control and/or abuse. Types of GBV include, but are not limited to: child, early, and forced marriage; female genital mutilation/cutting; so-called “honor”-based violence and killings, and other harmful practices; acid violence; dating violence; domestic violence; female infanticide; femicide or gender-related killing of women and girls; all forms of human trafficking; intimate partner violence; sexual harassment; stalking; all forms of sexual violence, including reproductive and sexual coercion and rape, including marital rape, so-called “corrective” rape, and rape as a tactic of conflict. All interventions that address or respond to GBV perpetrated against women and girls or men or boys, or other groups on the basis of their gender identity or expression, are to be reported in this linked key issue. If the project/activity addresses child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) or female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C), the narrative should clearly describe in detail CEFM/FGM/C related activities. For the purposes of attribution, the GBV linked key issue should be considered to be mutually exclusive from the GE/WE-Primary and GE/WE-Secondary key issues.³

Gender equality expands opportunities so that equal opportunities and benefits are available to males and females.

Gender equity recognizes that to achieve equality special measures may be necessary to compensate for gender gaps and the legacy of discrimination. This usually involves a focus on women, because women are typically in a subordinate or disadvantaged position.

² USAID. 2021. ADS Chapter 205: *Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID’s Program Cycle. Partial Revision (January 22, 2021).*

³ Ibid.

Gender inclusion transcends masculine and feminine stereotypes of roles and responsibilities, and is premised on the belief that all services, opportunities, and establishments should be open to all people regardless of gender.

Gender norms are a subset of social norms which are shaped by patriarchy. Gender norms are socially constructed, based on collective beliefs about what behaviors are appropriate for women and men and the relations between them. They set socially held standards for a range of important decisions individuals make throughout their lifespans. Like social norms, there are expectations and perceived rules that dictate how to behave based on an individual's biological sex and social perceptions of their gender which are used to justify and reinforce social differences and inequalities. Individuals who adhere to these norms may be rewarded by social acceptance and inclusion, while those who do not conform to these norms may face negative consequences including social exclusion or violence.⁴

GESI (gender equality and social inclusion) analysis is a methodology for examining the causes and consequences of inequality. Drawing on methods for gender analysis, the approach uses disaggregated socioeconomic data to identify gaps and disparities resulting from inequality.

GESI lens focuses on understanding inequalities, including how and why different groups are being excluded, and what can be done to increase access to services, information, and assets for all. Using a GESI lens incorporates analysis of power structures and roles within a specific context to provide important insights into whether an activity or investment supports or exacerbates imbalances in power relations related to gender, discrimination, and social exclusion. The aim is to better understand contextual complexities to improve development outcomes and mitigate risks or unintended consequences.

Inclusion is a dynamic state in which diversity is leveraged to create a fair, healthy, and high-performing organization, or community. An inclusive environment is safe, respectful, engaging, celebratory, and motivating.

Inclusive Development is the concept that every person, regardless of identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies and their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes.⁵

Intersectionality recognizes that experiences of inequality result from the interaction of gender with other social markers of difference, including age, race, class, religion, disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression, compounding forms of discrimination. An intersectional approach examines differences within and among groups of men and women and gender non-conforming individuals, and how these differences create unequal opportunities.⁶

Marginalized groups are typically denied access to legal protection or social and economic participation and programs (i.e., police protection, political participation, access to healthcare, education,

⁴ The Social Norms Learning Collaborative. May 2021. *Social Norms Atlas: Understanding Global Social Norms and Related Concepts*. Washington, DC: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University.

⁵ USAID. 2018. *Automated Directives System 201 Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations*.

⁶ Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. 2021. *Gender Equality Lexicon. Second Edition (May 2021)*.

employment), whether in practice or in principle, for historical, cultural, political, and/or other contextual reasons. Such groups may include, but are not limited to, women and girls, persons with disabilities, LGBTI people, displaced persons, migrants, indigenous individuals and communities, youth and the elderly, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, people in lower castes, and people of diverse economic class and political opinions. These groups often suffer from discrimination in the application of laws and policy and/or access to resources, services, and social protection, and may be subject to persecution, harassment, and/or violence. They may also be described as “underrepresented,” “at-risk,” or “vulnerable”.⁷

Persons with disabilities are people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.²⁹ Disability is caused by socially constructed barriers in the environment and not by a person’s impairment or difference.⁸

Sex is the biological categorization of a person as male, female, or intersex that is assigned at birth based on biological indicators, including hormones, sex chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia. Sex and gender tend to be conflated, which contributes to confusion and erroneous beliefs that cultural practices, roles, and norms around gender are biologically determined and cannot be changed.⁹

Social inclusion is a process and approach through which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities regardless of background or identity, including policies, approaches, and special measures that increase participation in decision-making and leadership as well as access to information, services, resources, and assets.

Social norms are shared expectations and often unspoken beliefs about what people do *and* should do. These are embedded in formal and informal institutions, and in attitudes and behaviors that guide how individuals interact in society, the economy, and within the household. In the context of markets, social norms influence the control of productive assets, with gendered occupational roles and care responsibilities often limiting women’s ability to engage with and benefit from economic opportunities.¹⁰

Stereotypes are standardized mental pictures that are held in common by members of a group and that represent an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.

Vulnerable groups are those groups or individuals at greater risk of poverty, displacement, injury, or social exclusion, based on context or situation. This includes different factors, such as ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability status, poverty, occupation, and location.

⁷ USAID. 2018. *Automated Directives System 201 Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations*.

⁸ USAID. 2018. *Automated Directives System 201 Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations*.

⁹ Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. 2021. *Gender Equality Lexicon*. Second Edition (May 2021).

¹⁰ Singh, Nisha, Anam Parvez Butt, and Claudia Canepa. 2018. “Shifting Social Norms in the Economy for Women’s Economic Empowerment: Insights from a Practitioner Learning Group. The SEEP Network and Oxfam.

Women’s economic empowerment and gender equality (working definition): Women’s economic empowerment exists when women can equitably participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic opportunities as workers, consumers, entrepreneurs, and investors. This requires access to and control over assets and resources, as well as the capability and agency to manage the terms of their own labor and the benefits accrued. Women’s economic equality exists when all women and girls have the same opportunities as men and boys for education, economic participation, decision-making, and freedom from violence. This requires collectively addressing barriers to commercial activity and labor market participation, such as: restrictive laws, policies, and cultural norms; infrastructure and technology challenges; unpaid care work; limits on collective action; and poorly enforced protections. Women’s economic equality is just one facet of gender equality more generally, which requires attention to the full range of gender gaps—economic, political, educational, social, and otherwise.¹¹

¹¹ This is not an official definition of USAID or any other organization but rather a practical working definition that provides sufficient clarity in pursuing USAID’s economic goals about gender equality and female empowerment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Per requirements in the USAID Automated Directives System (ADS) 201.3.2.9 and ADS 205, USAID/Laos hired Banyan Global to undertake a countrywide gender analysis to inform the Mission's 2022–2027 Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS). The Gender Analysis aligns with the [USAID Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy \(2020\)](#), U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence (2016), and the 2018 Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment (WEEE) Act.

A gender analysis is a systematic process used to identify, understand, and describe gender differences and the relevance of gender roles, responsibilities, rights, opportunities, patterns of decision making and leadership, and access to resources and services in a specific context. It is a tool for examining the causes and consequences of inequality and identifying gender program priorities for more impactful and equitable development interventions. This USAID/Laos Gender Analysis focuses on five priority sectors, examining gender inequalities through an intersectional lens to better understand opportunities and constraints faced by key populations and cross-cutting themes (Table 1).

TABLE 1. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE GENDER ANALYSIS

SECTORS	USAID ADS 205 GENDER ANALYSIS DOMAINS	CROSS-CUTTING THEMES	KEY POPULATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health• Education• Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance• Energy/Environment• Economic Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Laws, policies, regulations, and institutional practices• Cultural norms and beliefs• Gender roles, responsibilities, and time use• Access to and control over assets and resources• Patterns of power and decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender-based violence (GBV)• Women's Economic Empowerment• COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ethnic groups• Youth• Persons with disabilities

Drawing on primary and secondary data, this report provides an overview of key findings and recommendations, with illustrative indicators for each of the five sectors. All key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 120 documents and reports were included in the literature review (see Annex B for a summary of findings, by ADS 205 gender analysis domain). A total of 62 interviews were undertaken, with 103 key informants consulted, including experts at USAID/Laos and the United States (U.S.) Embassy, development partners, and Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) stakeholders, as well as civil society organizations and implementing partners. The objective is to offer insights into potential future pathways for achieving gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) across programs, projects, and activities. Particular focus is on these priority sectors and key areas of work:

- Health — maternal, child health and nutrition (MCHN), disabilities (including unexploded ordnance incidents), HIV/AIDS (PEPFAR), Malaria (PMI), and Global Health Security Agenda

- Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) — Legal Aid, Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP), and gender-based violence (GBV)
- Education — early grade reading
- Economic Growth — business enabling environment, support for SMEs, improving regional trade, transparency and regulatory certainty, entrepreneurship, and innovation
- Energy/Environment — energy security and natural resource autonomy

Table 2 presents key findings and recommendations that rose to the top in the analysis and interpretation of primary and secondary data.

TABLE 2. GENDER ANALYSIS KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
GENDER INCLUSION POLICY	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of reliable and disaggregated data (by sex, urban/rural, upland/lowland, ethno-linguistic group, and disabilities) hinders measurement, analysis, and evaluation at the national level and among USAID partners as an integral part of monitoring, reporting, learning, and evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the collection and analysis of high-quality disaggregated data (e.g., by sex, urban/rural, upland/lowland, ethno-linguistic group, and disabilities). • Continue to require USAID partners to conduct GESI analyses and baseline studies, with an emphasis on the importance of context-specific and inclusive consultations to inform data collection and analysis.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need to identify and address the risks of GBV across all sectors and awards and a need for enhanced capacity for USAID/Laos technical offices and partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regardless of the sector, objectives, or award, USAID staff and partners should analyze GBV risks and address them through prevention, mitigation, and response measures. This should be paired with enhanced capacity building for USAID/Laos technical office and partner staff. • Collaborate with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in supporting stand-alone holistic GBV activities focused on prevention, mitigation, and response.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women, youth, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons are underrepresented in consultations, assessments, and decision-making for mission awards and strategies. This results in incomplete information about community needs and priorities and may contribute to inadequate or even harmful interventions. A lack of diversity in staffing also affects the ability to communicate with ethnic minority communities, especially women, and to understand the cultural context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that USAID partner staff reflect the diversity of local populations and language skills of the districts and communities in which they are working. • Revise USAID/Laos recruitment and retention policies so that they include measures to attract and retain staff from underrepresented groups to better represent the diversity of Lao PDR populations. • Establish an annual internship and mentoring program within USAID/Laos for underrepresented ethnic groups.
GENDER INCLUSION PRACTICE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meaning of gender, as well as the difference between gender equality and gender equity, is poorly understood, including among some USAID mission technical and partner staff. Key informants note that most people think that gender means “women,” and the best way to obtain gender equality is for women to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance USAID mission and partners’ understanding of the purpose of GESI-responsive activities for improving outputs and outcomes—the benefits of balance and fairness in representation and diversity, and intersectional gender equality. • Increase USAID mission senior-level GESI support, and awareness among management, with targeted trainings, resources, monitoring, coordination, and criteria.

<p>more—work harder to get more opportunities. This does not take into consideration unequal divisions of labor within the household, including unpaid care responsibilities, and women’s labor elasticity constraints and time poverty.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support Lao National University Women’s Study Center to strengthen gender and development studies and prepare a new generation of GESI specialists.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some embassies and aid organizations in Lao PDR are leading by example, demonstrating gender inclusion and responsiveness in both actions and words, such as in trainings, communications, events, publications, and activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> USAID and US Embassy should together agree to honor the following commitments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The “Panel Pledge”: invited speakers or participants will refuse to participate on any panel if women are not included as panelists. Host USAID- and Embassy-funded events in accessible venues; provide sign language and minority language interpretation. Review invitee lists to verify that women, youth, and individuals from underrepresented groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals, are invited as attendees and presenters. Host an informal “brown bag” luncheon series for staff, with speakers, videos, or films that explore topics related to gender equality, disability inclusion, cultural traditions among ethnic minority groups, and experiences of LGBTQI+ persons.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Normative-change strategies for questioning harmful or discriminatory norms need to be integrated in all mission activities. Norms around masculinity tend to justify violence and impose restrictions on women’s mobility, ability to own property or access to resources, and access to paid employment or other economic opportunities. They also reduce opportunities for women and men to share workloads, even when task-shifting and sharing could improve family relations and increase efficiency, productivity, and income. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in social norms diagnosis and measurement as part of baseline and GESI analysis reports—including surveys that incorporate “vignettes” that ask hypothetical questions about “what others do,” to encourage more open responses. Integrate norms-transformative strategies and approaches into all activity designs and implementation to improve outputs and outcomes. Integrate and apply proven household methodologies (i.e., GALS, SASA!) in activity implementation to help effect shifts in discriminatory social norms and mindsets. Support facilitated discussions and trainings for mission staff to reflect on their own implicit biases and assumptions, to analyze ingrained perspectives or viewpoints and reorient mindsets.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draw on examples of male engagement programs from other countries to promote positive shifts in conceptions of “masculinities,” including benefits of more equitable distribution of household tasks and cooperation in reproductive and economic activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate support for male engagement to promote positive masculinities across activities and programming, drawing on best practice examples as appropriate for specific sectors and activities.
<h2>EDUCATION</h2>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of quality education and low levels of learning affect both male and female children, more than lack of access to schools. There are shortages of basic school supplies (chalk, paper, pens, and pencils) and textbooks, and the curriculum shift to active learning is resisted by some teachers. Moreover, most teachers are not able to diagnose or accommodate learning differences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand support for training, coaching, and mentoring among in-service (and pre-service) teachers to effect changes in pedagogy, interactions, and diagnostics, such as: teaching Lao as a second language; training to identify disabilities and learning differences; and use of accommodations to support students. Support expansion in availability and quality of early childhood education programs and facilities, prioritizing underserved areas. Continue to support increases in available textbooks so every student can take them home. Continue to support parent-teacher associations to improve school management and performance, with balanced participation of fathers and mothers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vocational education or training programs are not well aligned with labor market demands or emerging opportunities. Public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support public-private sector partnerships for skills development, in-kind contributions, employment, and self-employment for youth.

private partnerships for skills training are effective when matched with market demand for services.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girls and young women are underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide scholarships in STEM subjects to female students and students from underrepresented ethno-linguistic groups who commit to pursuing careers in the energy sector.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender norms limit educational opportunities for both girls and boys, with inequitable learning outcomes and dropout rates, especially among girls in ethnic minority regions and children with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand scholarship opportunities for students and young women from underrepresented ethnic-linguistic groups to incentivize continuing education and student retention. Support second-chance learning options for older students who can no longer reenter or integrate into formal education.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most schools are not accessible and lack assistive and adaptive technology and devices that could support learning for children with disabilities. Moreover, teachers are unable to diagnose disabilities, and are not required to report them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide assistive and adaptive technology and devices to support learning for children with disabilities. Work with local and international partners advocating for inclusive education with the GOL, and for integrating inclusive education more definitively in the 2021–2025 Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP). Provide support and training for teachers in primary schools to better identify and diagnose learning and other disabilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little research on the prevalence of school-related GBV (SRGBV) in Lao PDR; this does not mean it is non-existent. SRGBV affects dropout rates and influences parental decisions on keeping children out of school, especially girls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support a survey on SRGBV to understand the prevalence and what may be required for prevention and response. Establish an information management system, in collaboration with MOES, to collect disaggregated data on SRGBV (gender, locale, and ethno-linguistic group); work with schools, health centers, and police to link cases handled at the community level with national-level systems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital platforms need to be further strengthened, but these require families to have access to affordable Internet connections. Other options, such as radio programming, are needed for those who do not have access to the Internet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to support improvements in digital platforms to strengthen learning. Explore radio programming to strengthen distance learning for children in remote areas who may live too far from secondary schools.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34 percent of schools have no water or sanitation, and menstruation remains a taboo subject. WASH in schools benefits not only girls who have reached puberty but also female teachers who are menstruating. Improved WASH facilities might help to address the high rates of absenteeism among teachers, the majority of whom are women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support open discussions about menstruation among older children, girls, teachers, and administrators to reduce the shame associated with menstruation; provide guidance on how to manage menstruation hygienically. Support WASH facilities and hygiene practices in schools.

HEALTH

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's access to and ability to make decisions about health care are fundamental to health outcomes for women and their families and are correlated with women's economic empowerment. Increasing the share of household income controlled by women has beneficial effects on nutrition, family planning, maternal mortality, and child mortality, and can also lead to increased investment in children's education, delayed marriage, and reductions in GBV. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate financial literacy and skills training into health interventions that increase knowledge and information about nutrition, family planning, and maternal and child health. Support social and behavioral change communication strategies that promote male engagement and shared health care decision-making among couples, shared responsibilities in the care economy, women's access to and control over income and assets, and the benefits of education and delayed marriage for girls and boys.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health services/facilities in remote areas are inadequate, particularly in ethnic minority communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support decentralized access to maternal, neonatal, child, and family health care in rural areas, through free mobile care, expansion of rural health centers with accessibility for persons with disabilities, and support for village health volunteers, especially in rural areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of capacity building and compensation for village health workers (VHWs) affects knowledge, performance, and health outcomes, particularly in maternal, adolescent, and child health and for persons with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance VHWs through capacity building and compensation, concentrating on improving nutrition and maternal and child health. Strengthen outreach to persons with disabilities through VHWs and health centers; provide improved services and information on government sponsored programs, such as availability of free prosthetics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language barriers and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and increased hesitancy to seek health care, especially for individuals from minority ethnic groups, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide cultural sensitivity and awareness training to health care personnel working in ethnic minority areas, as well as support for local language interpretation. Increase diversity among VHWs through the placement and promotion of ethnic minority candidates, to reduce language barriers and improve cultural awareness and sensitivity in ethnic minority communities. Produce easy-to-read (with visual images) health information brochures in ethnic minority languages, covering critical health-related topics (e.g., maternal and child health, malaria prevention, infections and STI, and C-TIP).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although 65 percent of frontline healthcare workers are women, female leadership in the healthcare system is low, especially in senior health management positions. There are more male VHWs than females, and few young VHWs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support increased female leadership in the health care system by advocating for the GOL 2025 target of 30 percent female leadership at the central level and 20 percent at the provincial and district level. Promote strategies that alleviate unpaid care work for healthcare workers, reduce women's time poverty, and increase opportunities for women's advancement within the healthcare system. Provide scholarship and research funding opportunities for female students and doctors, partnering with high schools and universities to encourage more girls to pursue medical school. Support mentoring by senior women health care providers of younger women to encourage entry into the profession. Support diversity in VHWs, with increased placement and promotion of women and youth, including from ethnic minority groups.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health facilities do not have sufficient privacy areas for women and girls. Staff have limited clinical and counseling competencies related to: adolescent reproductive health; contraceptives; family planning; pre- and post-natal care. Although adolescent pregnancy creates health concerns for both mother and child, the social stigma around early pregnancy increases reluctance to seek medical care, exacerbated by the pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish privacy areas for women and girls at health centers and facilities for both deliveries and consultations, to improve services and confidentiality, especially in rural areas. Increase access to contraceptives and family planning counseling, through awareness campaigns (videos, consultations, digital platforms, radio/TV announcements) and by engaging health centers, VHWs, village committees, and district health extension workers in disseminating this information, including in ethnic minority languages. Encourage health workers to provide adolescent reproductive health/family planning information and consultation services in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner (including by phone, online, and through VHWs).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor pre/post-natal care outcomes for women and infants are largely a result of long distances to services, and a lack of knowledge about health and nutrition needs of pregnant and lactating women. The support and involvement of male family members (i.e., husbands and fathers) in such health services would increase women's access to health facilities and lead to a better understanding of maternal and reproductive health care needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support social and behavior change communication campaigns and activities that promote positive male engagement in maternal and child health and nutrition. Promote positive male role models and champions (i.e., male influencers) who support women's pre/post-natal care and child health and nutrition, through social media, TV/radio, WhatsApp, and bulletin boards, at central, provincial, district and village levels.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's and children's health and nutrition are negatively affected by food taboos and other traditions, including restrictions on certain foods, women eating after other family members (when less food is available), and women doing hard labor even while pregnant. Women's workloads reduce time for preparing healthy meals. There is also a lack of understanding about nutritional needs in the first 1,000 days (from conception to a child's second birthday), especially among ethnic minority women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support nutrition programs/activities within primary schools and non-formal education programs, working with parent-teacher associations and VHVs. Support social and behavioral change communication campaigns that promote new norms for optimal health (replacing harmful social norms), using approaches and messages that are sensitive to cultural differences. Connect young ethnic women and men to parenting courses that include modules on child caring, traditions and childrearing practices, health and growth monitoring, healthy food, and good hygiene practices.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The health sector lacks clinical management protocols for survivors of GBV, including referral procedures, standard reporting requirements, and protocols for coordination with multisectoral services such as the police, legal services, shelters, and rehabilitation services. This is especially necessary considering the increased prevalence of GBV due to COVID. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support a coordinated and expanded GBV and violence against women (VAW) prevention and response system, with clear referral pathways across sectors, organizations, and government entities, and national guidelines for Standard Operating Procedures. Provide targeted technical assistance to the Sub-Committees for the Advancement of Women at the provincial, district, and village levels, and provide support to the 2021–2025 National Plan of Action on Preventing and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Violence against Children (NPAVAWVAC).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women with disabilities have less access to health services than men with disabilities, because most rehabilitation services are at the central or provincial levels and women lack mobility. Women are also more likely to be the caregivers for persons with disabilities, which can impact their physical and mental health. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support accessibility and services at health facilities (i.e., ramps, assistive product services, sign language, and privacy rooms). Conduct information campaigns on available services and free government-sponsored services for persons with disabilities. Provide counseling support for caregivers of persons with disabilities through district health facilities, extension workers, and village health centers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer support groups and services for persons with HIV/AIDS are limited or nonexistent in rural areas. LGBTQI+ persons face great barriers in accessing effective HIV case finding and continuity of treatment services due to many factors, including stigmatization from health service providers. Testing is limited, and there is a need for increasing awareness about testing and treatment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the expansion of peer support groups for persons with HIV/AIDS to increase access to health services and information about testing and treatment. Provide capacity building and training to health care personnel to encourage greater professional care and treatment of HIV/AIDS patients.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women and men lack knowledge of how malaria is contracted and can be prevented. Communication campaigns and data collection on malaria need to include targeted messages for women and men (especially among minority ethnic groups most at risk), and to increase access to testing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and increase awareness of women and men most at risk of contracting malaria to strengthen awareness and improve collection of data on malaria transmission and prevention through local health centers and VHVs. Improve access to malaria testing.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business development services are not providing targeted support for smaller enterprises, especially for women-owned businesses and those outside of urban areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand business development services to provincial and district levels, supporting "right-sized" need-to-know services and capacity building that are responsive to the needs of smaller enterprises, which tend to be owned or operated by women. Support literacy, numeracy, and Internet know-how to increase business development and expansion, targeting women entrepreneurs in rural areas. Support the development of self-paced online business development learning platforms, with targeted tools to support smaller businesses,
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	including ICT tools, marketing, and information on how to write a business plan and other lessons for aspiring business owners.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More women than men open a business or work as traders out of necessity, because they need a source of income and flexibility to accommodate care economy responsibilities. Time and labor constraints and lack of collateral also inhibit access to capital, business development and expansion, and entrepreneurial innovation and risk taking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support interventions that recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work to reduce women's time poverty and increase women's employment or self-employment choices and economic agency. Integrate household methodologies to facilitate dialogue, critical reflection, and goal setting, to improve cooperation between partners and more equitable workloads in both reproductive and economic activities, including business development expansion and innovation. Support gender-responsive business development services that improve women's financial literacy, access to capital, and business acumen while building self-confidence and personal initiative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive economic growth is hindered by low job growth as well as limited access to capital to expand local enterprises or launch startups. Access to finance or credit can be especially problematic for women who tend to lack collateral and have lower levels of financial literacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support social enterprise organizations and business associations that work with youth empowerment and entrepreneurship. Support intensive (weekend) startup "challenge" accelerator events at the provincial level that crowdsource funding, offer technical support (business and marketing plans), and create networking opportunities for aspiring young entrepreneurs. Expand training in financial literacy to include: household budgeting and expenses; product pricing and sales to maximize profits; and optimal allocations of time and labor among family members—all examined through a gender lens.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural production is shifting from subsistence farming to market-oriented and diversified production, often a difficult transition for farmers. Moreover, women's time poverty as well as poor soil quality limit farmers' options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support access to new market opportunities, such as those created by the Lao-China rail line and organic agriculture. Support mobile agro-input supplier enterprises, including focusing on needs of women farmers. Subsidize appropriate technologies and female-friendly labor-saving devices to reduce time poverty. Integrate a household methodology into project activities, such as GALS (Gender Action Learning System), to support shifts in social norms and changes in labor allocation that benefit families and increase incomes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tourism and agriculture are sectors with the most potential for inclusive jobs growth in rural and remote areas. Increased agricultural productivity can have up to three times the poverty-reducing effect of nonagricultural growth, and tourism provides business opportunities and creates jobs that are more accessible for the poor and less-skilled in rural areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support agricultural production, especially organic produce, as well as short-distance value chains for niche products, marketed and supplied to tourist destinations. Provide scholarships for formal education and vocational training in skills needed for the tourism sector, including English language fluency, ICTs, e-marketing, and soft skills (reliability, communication, and negotiation), prioritizing for women and girls, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ecotourism in Lao PDR is growing; links between tourism and agriculture could be used to promote agritourism, an increasingly popular trend in other countries that may provide opportunities and jobs that are more accessible for the poor and less-skilled in rural areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support scholarships and local training on ecotourism and agritourism ("dos and don'ts"), especially for ethnic minority communities, focusing on basic literacy, numeracy, and food safety and sanitization. Increase awareness in communities with ecotourism demand (or potential) about new guidelines for ecotourism, agritourism, and homestay from other countries. Support tourism and hospitality vocational courses at the provincial level, focusing on digital skills for e-commerce and marketing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Migrant labor and remittances are "safety valves" for youth (of any gender) who lack other opportunities, with migrant outflows likely to surpass previous levels as COVID-19 enters an endemic stage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support information campaigns on legal rights of migrants to enable safe migration both within Lao PDR and abroad, in partnership with non-profit association/civil society organizations (CSOs) who work with vulnerable groups most at risk of being trafficked, such as ethnic minority women from rural areas and LGBTQI+ persons.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance support for tourism, agriculture, and handicrafts production, which provide the potential for job growth especially among the poor, women, and minority ethnic groups in rural and remote areas.
DEMOCRACY, RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women’s decision-making capacity, political participation, and leadership opportunities are limited at provincial and local levels. Patriarchal structures, fewer education opportunities, and heavy workloads disadvantage women’s leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support male and female parliamentary leaders in joint initiatives and constituency outreach to gather data on gender and social inclusion in leadership and consultations. Expand support for the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) through a media campaign to create social awareness on the importance of female parliamentarians. Provide support and resources—such as fundraising training, campaign technical assistance, and leadership capacity-building—for female candidates, candidates with disabilities, and candidates who identify as LGBTQI+ persons.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Village Mediation Units (VMU) mediation reinforces traditional gender roles and responsibilities, rather than individual legal rights under the law. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design and implement awareness programs for rural and remote areas that explain basic concepts of law to increase understanding about how to exercise rights, especially for women. Provide training to VMU appointees on equality provisions in formal laws (i.e., 2004 Law on the Development and Protection of Women and Children, 2004 Law on Women’s Development and Protection, 2014 Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children) and CEDAW recommendations, as well as UNFPA’s Essential Services Package on GBV, 2021–2025 NPAVAWVAC, and 2021–2025 National Action Plan on Gender Equality.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most legal providers are located in urban areas, inaccessible for women and vulnerable populations with limited resources and mobility. There are relatively few female lawyers. Lawyers generally have limited knowledge of GBV prevention, response, and justice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage women to pursue legal studies through scholarships and mentoring (by women lawyers) and through outreach to secondary schools and universities. Support government targets to increase female leadership in the legal system through mentorship, scholarships, and awareness programs for high school graduates to promote enrollment in legal studies and increase the number of female lawyers and women in the judiciary.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by distance and accessibility to legal aid services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand support for mobile legal aid clinics which can offer pro bono services for persons with disabilities, staffed by experienced lawyers (or paralegals) and interpreters for sign language as well as minority languages.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vulnerability to trafficking is higher among poor rural households, economic migrants with limited education and language skills, and individuals with non-binary gender identities (e.g., LGBTQI+ youth). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand information campaigns targeted to rural communities on the legal rights of migrants to enable safe migration. Increase life skills and vocational training for at-risk populations and among trafficking survivors, incorporating gender equality, financial literacy, and confidence building. Conduct a risk analysis of vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ persons to GBV, to develop concrete strategies for prevention and mitigation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional customs perpetuate early marriage, especially among some ethnic minority groups and in rural and remote areas. Parents are persuaded by marriage brokers to “marry” their daughters for economic gain, with some girls/women sexually exploited or forced into commercial sex work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support social and behavioral change communication and information campaigns in local dialects and engagement with community leaders to increase awareness about trafficking risks and other dangers or consequences of early marriage, including impacts on health, education, nutrition, and violence and abuse. Provide information about trafficking—including child marriage, commercial sex, and forced labor—in youth education programs in secondary schools.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate district-level immigration infrastructure and limited understanding of TIP creates easy transit points for human trafficking of Lao nationals. Regional level authorities lack training in how to screen for or counsel trafficking victims. Most 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical assistance to the National Secretariat to develop anti-trafficking action plans at the provincial level, integrating gender-sensitive guidelines in prevention and response, including victim identification, protection, and gender-sensitive reintegration

<p>police are male and are unfamiliar with referral mechanisms for counseling and support. The central National Secretariat/Anti-Trafficking Department (NS/ATD) is the only institution capable of formally identifying and referring victims of human trafficking.</p>	<p>(responsive to unique gender identity, ethnicity, disability, and age needs).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen the capacity of ministries to identify victims and refer them to gender-responsive legal and counseling support. Provide training to immigration officials on how to screen for and identify potential trafficking victims, and the heightened risks of trafficking for girls, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The new rail link (Belt Road Initiative) will potentially "land-link" Lao PDR's economy and reduce overland travel times significantly; however, it also increases TIP risks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct a TIP risk assessment including the impact on vulnerable groups (women, girls, ethnic minorities); conduct awareness-raising informational campaigns to mitigate risks. Strengthen CTIP prevention and response mechanisms in coordination with CSOs and police, particularly in areas with increased risk due to the new railway.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a need for increased services for GBV survivors, and for updated data. (The most recent survey was conducted in 2014.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand legal assistance, psychosocial support, and reintegration services in rural communities for GBV survivors, particularly for vulnerable populations (women, children, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities). Support a country-wide prevalence survey on Violence Against Women and Girls to support formal data collection to better inform programs and services, in collaboration with Lao Statistic Bureau, NCAWMC, LWU, WHO, and UNFPA.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural traditions influence what is defined as domestic violence, and conflict mediation is handled by VMUs that tend to promote restoration rather than restitution or protection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide GBV sensitization training with VMUs, community development committees, village councils, and community members focusing on violence prevention and mitigation, how to support survivors, and available services. Engage male leaders to increase awareness of the negative impacts of GBV on the family and community. Support awareness-raising campaigns through radio/TV, social media, WhatsApp, poster boards, village councils, and VMUs, highlighting the value and importance of girls' education, women's representation in leadership positions, and women's legal rights.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a lack of GBV prevalence and incidence data, referral procedures, standard reporting requirements, and protocols for coordination among the police, legal services, shelters, and rehabilitation services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Liaise with UNDP, LWU and NCAWMC on the Khan Hom Project that works with the police and justice sectors to support coordinated and expanded GBV prevention and response systems, and to create clear referral pathways across sectors, organizations, and government entities. Coordinate with UNDP on the rollout and training of the Essential Service Package and National Guidelines for SOPs for GBV prevention and response within the police and justice sectors, focusing on assistance to LWU, NCAWMC, and SubCAVs and implementation at the provincial and district levels, including villages.

ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) Gender Strategy seeks to increase women's employment and leadership in the energy sector, although mechanisms and objectives for doing so remain unclear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support implementation of MEM 2021–2025 GESI Strategy Five-Year Development Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve management and information systems, including monitoring and evaluation, with collection of disaggregated data (by gender and ethnic group). Offer training about gender equality and the business case (economic logic) of gender inclusion within the energy sector, including MEM and state-owned utilities as well as the private sector. Support skills-building training for women working in MEM, Electricite du Laos (EDL, the national utility company), and independent power producers (IPPs), including components on confidence building,
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	negotiation skills, use of technical English language, and personal initiative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender stereotypes coupled with occupational segmentation inhibit the choice of study subjects and career options of girls and women, who remain underrepresented in the energy sector and in management and decision-making positions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide scholarships and targeted training for young women and under-represented ethnic groups to pursue STEM subjects in high school and university. Conduct a market assessment of energy sector workforce needs and priorities to identify existing and future skills gaps, including opportunities in low-carbon, renewable energy, and green growth. Partner with public and private utilities to co-design gender-equality initiatives in company policies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender equality in energy requires understanding the supply and demand constraints to increasing employment opportunities and reducing occupational segmentation, as well as identifying potential areas for job growth across energy services (e.g., access and maintenance, service quality, tariffs and regulations, accounting and monitoring evaluation, and reporting, and financial performance). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess energy employment opportunities to better tailor training and support in those areas, across energy sector services. Inform activities and interventions based on an understanding of demand and supply constraints in the energy sector.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) do not always carefully assess impacts, especially pertaining to livelihoods restoration, resettlement, and inclusive consultations. Dams and run-of-river hydropower projects have negative effects on biodiversity, fish stocks, and edible aquatic plants, impacting food security and incomes, especially for women who tend to rely more heavily on natural resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to strengthen gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) analysis in ESIs to mitigate hydropower impacts on local livelihoods and natural resources, including run-of-river. Review natural resources and energy-related policies to support revisions, with GESI-responsive provisions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in hydropower has not led to gains in local employment, limiting opportunities for skills development, knowledge transfer, and income generation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate for changes in FDI policies to require that investors hire and employ local people (with preference given to project-affected people, especially women and minority ethnic groups), to increase opportunities for employment, skills development, and knowledge transfer.

Section 1 provides an overview of the country context and the GESI landscape. Section 2 highlights findings, evidence, and recommendations for USAID/Laos on GESI. Sections 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 provide findings, evidence, and recommendations for the education; health; economic growth; democracy, human rights, and governance; and energy environment sectors. Annex A includes the secondary sources consulted for this report, and Annex B provides preliminary findings on gender equality, by USAID ADS 205 domain.

I COUNTRY CONTEXT AND GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION LANDSCAPE

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), is a landlocked lower middle-income country situated along the Mekong River in the center of Southeast Asia. It has an ethnically diverse, largely rural population of about 7.4 million (2021), of which 50.1 percent are female.¹² While 68 percent of the population resides in rural areas,¹³ urbanization has expanded at an annual rate of 5.3 percent —among the fastest in Southeast Asia.¹⁴ A majority of households are headed by men (86.9 percent).¹⁵ Female-headed households are more prevalent in urban areas (17.2 percent) than in rural areas (11.2 percent); the share of female-headed households is highest in Vientiane Capital (21.2 percent), Khammuan (20.4 percent), and Champasack (18.6 percent).¹⁶



I.1 YOUTH

Lao PDR is among the youngest countries in Asia, with a median age of 23.¹⁷ Most youth (70 percent) reside in rural areas. Of the female population, 42.9 percent are youth.¹⁸ Lao PDR has one of the highest adolescent birth rates in the region, at 65.4 births per 1,000 girls (15 to 19 years old).¹⁹ Early marriage is common in Lao PDR, and more common among girls and young women than boys and young men: for ages 15-19, the ratio is 19 percent versus 6 percent; for ages 20–24, by comparison, the marriage rates are 59 percent for women and 36 percent for men.²⁰ **One-third (33 percent) of women aged 20 to**

¹² World Population Review. 2021. “Laos Population 2021 (Live).” ([Link](#))

¹³ GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

¹⁴ UN Habitat. 2016. *World Cities Report*.

¹⁵ GOL. 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

¹⁶ This is defined as a household that does not have an adult male earning member and is headed by a woman who may have been widowed, separated, or deserted. GOL. 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

¹⁷ World Population Review. 2021. “Laos Population 2021 (Live).” ([Link](#))

¹⁸ GOL. 2015. “Results of Population and Housing Census, 2015.” Lao Statistics Bureau, Vientiane.

¹⁹ UNDP. 2020. *Human Development Report*. New York, NY. ([Link](#))

²⁰ GOL. 2015. “Lao Population Census 2015.” Lao Statistics Bureau.

24 years were married by the age of 18.²¹ The median age at first marriage among women aged 25 to 49 years is 19.2 years.²²

1.2 ETHNIC GROUPS

The Lao PDR National Assembly has recognized and registered 50 ethnic groups, which can be further broken down into more than 200 ethnic subgroups.²³ The different ethnic groups are often categorized into four ethno-linguistic families: Lao-Tai (8 groups), Hmong-Mien (two groups), Mon-Khmer (33 groups), and Sino-Tibetan (7 groups).²⁴ The majority Lao-Tai ethnic group comprises roughly 62 percent of the total population and generally lives in lowlands areas; the Khmer and Hmong are the next largest groups, comprising 11 percent and 9 percent of the population, respectively.²⁵ Non-Lao-Tai groups generally live in more remote rural and upland areas, where access to education and services is more limited. Specific initiatives that would help to address inequalities among ethnic groups are limited, and there are very few GOL-registered civil society organizations (CSOs) or non-profit associations (NPAs) which focus on the needs of minority ethnic groups.

1.3 DISABILITIES

According to the 2015 Census, 2.8 percent of people in Lao have a disability.²⁶ This is likely an underreporting, given that the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that persons with disabilities comprise around 15 percent of the population in most countries.²⁷ A 2020 survey report in Kham and Xayphouthong districts estimated that disability prevalence is 11.7 percent overall (13.4 percent in Kham and 9.9 percent in Xayphouthong).²⁸ These percentages are based on individuals who reported “having a lot of difficulty” and “cannot do at all” when undertaking functional activities.²⁹ These percentages are significantly higher than the 2015 Census and are more in line with WHO estimates.

A 2018 USAID report highlights that disabilities result from a variety of causes, including congenital health conditions, road accidents, infectious diseases, and unexploded ordnance (UXO).³⁰ In Lao PDR, at least 20,000 people have been killed or injured by UXO in the more than 40 years since the end of the

²¹ UNDP. 2020. *Human Development Report*. New York, NY. ([Link](#))

²² GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

²³ King, E, and Dominique van de Walle. 2010. “Ethno-linguistic Diversity and Disadvantage.” *Indigenous People, Poverty, and Development*: 50.

²⁴ Open Development Laos. 2019. “Ethnic Minorities and Indigenous People.” ([Link](#))

²⁵ GOL. 2015. “Results of population and housing census, 2015.” Lao Statistics Bureau, Vientiane.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ WHO. 2020. “Disability and Health: Key Facts.” ([Link](#))

²⁸ Nguyen, Liem, Wesley Pryor, and Manjula Marella. 2020. *Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID) Demonstration Model Impact Assessment – Baseline Survey Report*. World Education Inc., Vientiane. ([Link](#))

²⁹ Disability prevalence was strongly associated with increasing age and poverty; difficulties in communicating and self-care were less common than difficulties in seeing, walking, remembering, and hearing. Nguyen, Liem, Wesley Pryor, and Manjula Marella. 2020. *Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID) Demonstration Model Impact Assessment – Baseline Survey Report*. World Education Inc., Vientiane. ([Link](#))

³⁰ USAID. 2018. *USAID Lao PDR Gender Analysis on Disability: Final Gender Analysis Report*. Regional Development Mission, Bangkok.

Vietnam War.³¹ The disability report also notes that disability prevalence is relatively evenly distributed between men and women and across regions, ages, ethnic groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, gender identities, and sexual orientations. **However, it highlights that the economic, social, psychological, and health effects of disability are profoundly affected by gender and other sociocultural factors, and that women with disabilities tend to face more stigma and harassment than men with disabilities, with ethnic minority women marginalized even more.**³² This finding was corroborated by key informants, who expressed that women and girls with disabilities are more likely to be uneducated (kept “hidden,” or discouraged from going out because of inadequate and inaccessible school facilities), to have mobility issues, and to experience sexual violence.³³

I.4 GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Gender equality and human development outcomes vary significantly among the different regions of Lao PDR and between rural and urban areas and different ethnic groups.³⁴ The World Bank’s Human Capital Index (HCI) measures the amount of human capital a child can expect to attain by the age of 18, as a way of assessing the productivity of the next generation of workers (in comparison to the benchmark level of complete education and full health). The HCI is based on four indicators: expected years of schooling; quality of learning; adult survival rate; and proportion of children who are not stunted. **The HCI assessment concludes that a child born in Lao PDR today can expect on average to be 56 percent as productive as one with a complete education and full health.**³⁵ This was calculated prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further exacerbated health and education obstacles.

The 2020 Human Development Report (HDR) ranked Laos at 137 out of 189 countries and territories, with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.613.³⁶ This positions Lao in the middle range of human development. The HDR’s Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures women’s empowerment in three dimensions (reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity), ranks Lao at 113 out of 162 countries, with a GII value of 0.459. Between 1990 and 2019, the Lao PDR’s HDI value increased by 51.4 percent, from 0.405 to 0.613. This improvement in human capital is reflected in an increase of 14.6 years life expectancy at birth (from 53.4 to 67.9 years), an increase of 2.2 years in mean years of schooling (from 3.1 to 5.3 years), and an increase of 4.3 years in expected years of schooling (from 6.7 to 11 years), as well as declining infant and maternal mortality rates. Over the same time frame, gross national income per capita increased by about 281 percent, from \$1,944 to \$7,413, based on purchasing price parity estimates.³⁷

Despite these positive trends, at 0.613, Lao PDR’s HDI is slightly below the 0.631 average for countries in the medium development group and is substantially below the 0.747 average for countries in East Asia and the Pacific. **Moreover, when inequality is factored in, Lao’s HDI falls to 0.461.** This

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁴ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.

³⁵ World Bank. 2020. *Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Human Capital Index 2020*.

³⁶ UNDP. 2020. *Human Development Report*. New York, NY. ([Link](#))

³⁷ All dollar figures are U.S. dollars.

represents an “inequality deficit” of 24.8 percent—far higher than the overall 16.9 percent inequality deficit for East Asia and the Pacific. In addition, Lao PDR still ranks low on several global indices, including on governance, civic space and press freedom, business and competitiveness, and food security and nutrition.

The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap (GGG) report places Lao PDR at 37 globally (out of 156 countries) and third among countries in East Asia and the Pacific (below New Zealand and Philippines, which are ranked globally at 4 and 17, respectively).³⁸ In specific gender gap indices, Lao PDR’s 2021 performance is very high for economic participation and opportunity (at 1), but significantly lower for health and survival (57), political empowerment (104), and educational attainment (112).

Notably, according to the GGG report, Lao PDR has one of the best economic gender ratios, at 91.5 percent, and has achieved gender parity in senior and managerial roles among professional and technical workers. However, these data are disputed by key informants; they believe this reflects the situation in urban but not rural areas, and among matrilineal ethnic groups such as the Lao-Tai, but not patrilineal ethnic groups such as the Hmong.³⁹

1.5 POVERTY

Findings from the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (2018–2019) indicate that poverty declined from 24.6 percent in 2012/2013 to 18.3 percent in 2018/2019.⁴⁰ Approximately 9 percent of the population in Lao PDR lives on less than \$1.90 per day (in 2011 PPP terms), a sharp decline from 15.6 percent in 2012/2013. The data indicate, however, that, while northern and southern provinces have experienced a rapid reduction in poverty (except in Attapeu province), poverty reduction in urban areas and the central region have stagnated.

Multidimensional poverty declined from 2012/2013 to 2018/2019 across Laos (north, south, and central regions), except in the capital city Vientiane, where multidimensional poverty increased from 2.5 percent to 5.2 percent.⁴¹ **Five provinces account for more than half of the poor in Lao PDR:** Savannakhet (20.6 percent), Oudomxay (8.7 percent), Khammuane (8.3 percent), Saravane (8.0 percent) and Luang Prabang (7.7 percent).⁴² Levels of poverty are typically higher for agricultural households, minority ethnic groups, female-headed households, and household heads who are unemployed or have

³⁸ World Economic Forum. 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report. March 2021 Insight Report*. Geneva, Switzerland. ([Link](#))

³⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau. 2021. *Poverty in Lao PDR: Key Findings from the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey, 2018-2019*.

⁴¹ Multidimensional poverty is based on three main dimensions: consumption, education, and living standards (cooking fuel, access to drinking water and electricity, housing, and household assets). Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau. 2021. *Poverty in Lao PDR: Key Findings from the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey, 2018-2019*.

⁴² Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau. 2021. *Poverty in Lao PDR: Key Findings from the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey, 2018-2019*.

not completed lower secondary education.⁴³ Key informants offer that these gaps have widened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown containment measures.⁴⁴

The 2021 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) also affirms that ethnic minorities in Lao PDR are poorer than majority groups.⁴⁵ The majority Lao-Tai group is the least poor, with an MPI value of 0.048; the Mon-Khmer, the Sino-Tibetan and the Hmong-Mien groups all have MPI values of 0.190 or more. According to the MPI (based on education, health, and living standards), 23.1 percent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, with an additional 21.2 percent living near or vulnerable to multidimensional poverty. While these percentages are significant, it is notable that the numbers have dropped almost by half from the previous MPI (2011–2012), which calculated that a full 40.2 percent of the population was living in multidimensional poverty. Current calculations, however, were made prior to the 2021 second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent estimates suggest that an additional 170,000 people are living in poverty in 2021 (who were expected to be non-poor in 2021, prior to COVID-19).⁴⁶

1.6 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The World Bank's 2021 (August) Lao PDR Economic Monitor report examines the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses and households.⁴⁷ It notes that more households are at risk of falling into poverty due to declining income and job losses, because the second wave of COVID-19 and related containment measures have resulted in temporary widespread losses in employment and household income—some of which could become permanent, if containment measures need to be in place for a long period of time. The Asian Development Bank estimates that Lao PDR's GDP grew by 2.3 percent in 2021 and is expected to reach 4 percent growth in 2022, up from -0.5 percent in 2020.⁴⁸

Impacts from the second wave of COVID-19 in Lao PDR have disproportionately impacted urban and female workers.⁴⁹ The government announced a 14-day lockdown on April 22, 2021, which was extended until November 14, 2021. Today, many international checkpoints remain closed, flights are limited, and COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction tests and quarantining are required on arrival.

The lockdown caused disruption to businesses and a reduction in working hours and labor earnings. Employment declined from 84 percent to 45 percent in urban areas, and declined from 83 percent to 50 percent in rural areas. Greater urban employment losses were largely due to stronger enforcement of

⁴³ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.; and Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau. 2021. *Poverty in Lao PDR: Key Findings from the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey, 2018-2019*.

⁴⁴ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴⁵ UNDP. 2021. *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021: Unmasking disparities by ethnicity, caste, and gender*. New York, NY.

⁴⁶ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery*. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Asian Development Bank. 2021. *Asian Development Outlook Update (ADOU)*.

⁴⁹ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery*. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region.

lockdown measures in urban areas, where more community spread was taking place. **The number of employed women has halved, from 78 percent before the lockdown to 39 percent.**⁵⁰ This decline reflects, in part, the predominance of female employment in the hardest-hit sectors—wholesale and retail trade and other services, which account for two-thirds of female non-farm employment. This also likely reflects priorities and gender norms around the division of labor within households: care and domestic responsibilities have fallen largely on women, particularly with the closure of schools and daycare centers, increasing the burden of childcare on families, falling primarily on working mothers and adolescent girls.⁵¹

2 USAID/LAOS GENDER INCLUSION: FINDINGS, EVIDENCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1.1 DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A lack of reliable and disaggregated data hinders measurement, analysis, and evaluation. Key informants cite the need to strengthen the collection and analysis of disaggregated data at the national level and among USAID Implementing Partners (IPs), as an integral part of monitoring, reporting, learning, and evaluation.⁵²

- Support initiatives that will assist Laos in the collection and analysis of high-quality disaggregated data to capture gender and inclusion: e.g., sex, urban/rural, upland/lowland, ethno-linguistic group, and persons with disabilities (for example, through Lao Statistic Bureau).
- Require IPs to collect and analyze disaggregated data other than sex as part of monitoring, reporting, and evaluation.
- Continue to require USAID IPs to conduct gender and social inclusion (GESI) analyses and baseline studies; context-specific and inclusive consultations are critical to inform the data collection and analysis shaping implementation, adaptation, and recommendations.
- Modify or create custom indicators as useful and appropriate, to facilitate disaggregation beyond existing mandatory categories (e.g., including urban/rural, upland/lowland, and ethno-linguistic groups), to better capture and measure socioeconomic metrics of change.

⁵⁰ Men also experienced a decline, but it was much smaller – from 87 percent to 55 percent. World Bank. 2021. Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region.

⁵¹ GOL. 2020. COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Center for Development Policy Research, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Vientiane.

⁵² Key stakeholder interviews.

2.1.2 MONITORING AND REPORTING OF GBV

USAID IPs and NPAs/CSOs reported little, if any, monitoring or reporting on GBV. Regardless of sector or objective, sensitivity to the potential for GBV should be integrated into all activities, with increased awareness and understanding among USAID/Laos technical offices and IPs' staff, especially field staff. Majority male VMUs are not neutral arbitrators in domestic violence cases and tend to not be sensitive to the health and safety of female survivors. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)/UNDP Khan Hom Project presents an opportunity to strengthen prevention and response mechanisms, including developing SOPs to ensure clear guidance for all sectors and coordinated GBV prevention, response services for survivors of violence, and prosecution of perpetrators through the justice system.

- Regardless of the sector, objectives, or award, USAID staff and partners should analyze GBV risks and address them through prevention, mitigation, and response measures. This should be paired with enhanced capacity building for USAID/Laos technical office and partner staff in this area.
- Collaborate with UNDP in supporting stand-alone holistic GBV activities focused on prevention, mitigation, and response.

2.1.3 HUMAN RESOURCES DIVERSITY

“Within implementing partners there is a lack of cultural affiliation and language skills that [could] allow a real understanding and relationships of trust.”

– Key Informant

More diverse perspectives, knowledge, and priorities lead to better informed activities and more sustainable outcomes. Women, youth, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons are underrepresented in consultations, assessments, and decision-making. This results in incomplete information about community needs and priorities and may contribute to inadequate or even harmful interventions. Non-profit associations (NPAs)/CSOs cited difficulties in communicating with local people who do not speak the Lao language. Key informants also note that lack of diversity in staffing affects the ability to communicate with ethnic minority communities, especially women, and to understand the cultural context.⁵³ Staff diversity that better reflects ethno-linguistic groups, local populations, and underrepresented groups should be strongly encouraged within IPs and the NPAs/CSOs with whom they work.

- Recommend (require, if possible) that IP staff reflect on the diversity of local populations and language skills within the districts and communities in which they are working.
- Revise USAID/Laos recruitment and retention policies to include measures to attract and retain staff from underrepresented groups to better represent the diversity of Lao PDR populations.
- Establish an annual internship and mentoring program within USAID/Laos for underrepresented ethnic groups; SDC/Lao Junior Program Officer and USAID/Nepal Dalit Internship provide examples.

⁵³ Ibid.

2.1.4 GESI CRITERIA INTEGRATED IN SOLICITATIONS FOR PROPOSALS

USAID requires that all strategies, projects, and activities be informed by a gender analysis to identify specific gender gaps that must be integrated into the description/scope of work/state of objectives in solicitations, regardless of mechanism. (Refer to ADS 205 & 201, 2018 WEEE Act, and Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy.) By incorporating key criteria and objectives into all mechanisms and solicitations, and by evaluating an offeror's proposed strategies and capacity for addressing gender gaps, the solicitation process highlights the importance of integrating gender and inclusive development in USAID's activities. Key questions could focus on any previous work with underrepresented ethnic groups, and whether management or key staff members have GESI knowledge and experience with participatory methodologies that help to ensure inclusive participation. Workforce diversity and staff compositions can also indicate capacity. USAID/Laos should:

- Ensure that all solicitations include sufficient specifications for gender and inclusive development expectations. Integrate specific gender gaps that the offeror should respond to in their proposal in all mechanisms (not just requests for applications/requests for proposals).
- Assign points for offeror's understanding of the gender and inclusion gaps and their proposed interventions to address those gaps, to rank and evaluate technical proposals.
- Ensure project and activity designs are informed by a gender and/or inclusive development analysis and that the gender and social inclusion gaps that the activity will address during its implementation are clearly identified and integrated into the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plan.

2.2 PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

2.2.1 SUBSTANTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER EQUALITY

"There is talk about gender equality, but people really mean women."

– Key Informant

Discussions with key informants highlight a limited understanding of the meaning of gender, and of the difference between gender equality and gender equity, including among some partners and USAID mission technical staff. The main perception is that gender refers to women, and the way to attain gender equality is for women to work harder and have more opportunities.⁵⁴ This does not take into consideration unequal divisions of labor within the household, including unpaid care responsibilities, and women's related labor elasticity constraints and time poverty.

- Enhance USAID mission understanding of the purpose of GESI-responsive activities for improving outputs and outcomes: the benefits of balance and fairness in representation and diversity, and intersectional gender equality.
- Increase USAID mission senior-level GESI support and awareness among management with targeted trainings, resources, monitoring, coordination, and criteria.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

- Support Lao National University Women’s Study Center to strengthen gender and development studies and to prepare a new generation of GESI specialists.
- Apply a GESI lens to the analysis of all activities, outputs, and outcomes.

2.2.2 LEAD BY EXAMPLE

“There is a need to understand what makes something equitable, not equal. People think that laws don’t discriminate, but substantive inequalities remain for families who are poor, don’t speak Lao, might have a disability, or lack government identification cards, which give access to hospitals, and the ability to open a bank account or buy land.”

– Key Informant

Following the example of other embassies such as the Australian Embassy, the USAID Mission and US Embassy should together agree to demonstrate gender inclusion and responsiveness in all trainings, events, communications, events, publications, and activities. Visible (and vocal) support from senior staff can be critical in promoting equity and diversity and effecting changes in policy and implementation.

- Commit to the “Panel Pledge”: refuse to participate on any panel where women are not included as panelists.
- Host events only in accessible venues; provide sign language and ethnic minority language interpretation, if possible.
- Review invitee lists to verify that women, youth, and individuals from underrepresented groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals, are invited as attendees and presenters.
- Commit to prioritizing use of accessible offices and buildings (e.g., with ramps, elevators, and accessible toilets), including among IPs and for event venues.
- Introduce an informal “brown bag” luncheon series with speakers, videos, or films that explore topics related to gender equality, disability inclusion, cultural traditions among ethnic minority groups, and experiences of LGBTQI+ persons.

2.2.3 DISCRIMINATORY AND HARMFUL SOCIAL NORMS

A 2021 landscape report on social norms recommends that normative change approaches, questioning harmful or discriminatory norms, should be integrated into all activities, whether or not changing social norms is a primary outcome of the program or project.⁵⁵ Key informants consistently referenced social norms as a constraint to gender equality and women’s empowerment.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Britt, Charla. 2021. USAID Women’s Economic Empowerment Community of Practice Advancing Women’s Economic Empowerment: Social Norms Landscaping Study. Banyan Global.

⁵⁶ Key stakeholder interviews.

Social norms are implicit or informal rules of behavior that influence what individuals do, what a given group thinks or feels, and their beliefs about the behavior and attitudes of others.⁵⁷ Gender norms (a subset of social norms) regulate roles and responsibilities among family members and within households. Social norms can be discriminatory in that they tend to reinforce unequal status, power relations, and life options, and they can be harmful for both men and women.⁵⁸ Norms around masculinity tend to justify violence and to impose restrictions on women's mobility, ability to own property or access to resources, and access to paid employment and other economic opportunities. They also reduce opportunities for women and men to share workloads, even when task-shifting and sharing could improve family relations, reduce pressure or stress on the "bread winner" or predominant provider, and increase efficiency, productivity, and income. Though gender norms tend to be "sticky," there is increasing evidence that positive normative shifts can and do happen. The effectiveness of these shifts, and whether they are sustained, can largely depend on how the change is promoted.

- Invest in social norms diagnosis and measurement as part of baseline and GESI analysis reports; include surveys that incorporate "vignettes" (hypothetical questions about "what others do") as this tends to encourage more open responses.
- Integrate norms-transformative strategies and approaches into all activity designs and implementation to improve outputs and outcomes.
- Apply proven household methodologies to activities implementation (i.e., GALS, SASA!) to help effect shifts in discriminatory social norms and mindsets.
- Support facilitated discussions and trainings for staff to reflect on their own implicit biases and assumptions, to analyze ingrained perspectives or viewpoints and reorient mindsets.

2.2.4 MALE ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE MASCULINITIES

Few key informants cited targeted interventions for promoting positive masculinities and male engagement in programming or activities.⁵⁹ This is a missed opportunity. Examples of male engagement programs from other countries suggest starting with entry points that appeal to men's self-interest, and focusing on positive traits and healthy behaviors that benefit families and communities. The intent is to shift conceptions of "masculinities" from toxic to positive definitions of what it means to be a man, to obtain the benefits of more equitable distribution of household tasks and cooperation in productive and economic activities. Many use a "whole household" approach or methodology, such as GALS, to engage men and boys in reflexively examining gender norms and to reinforce the adoption of positive masculinities.

- Integrate support for male engagement to promote positive masculinities across activities and programming, drawing on best practice examples, as appropriate for the sector and activities.

⁵⁷ Heise, Lori, and Manji, K. Social Norms. DFID, Professional Development Reading Pack, No. 31, Applied Knowledge Services, 2016.

⁵⁸ Malhotra, Anju. 2021. "Reflections on Gender Norms and Systemic Change." WEDGE, University of Maryland, College Park.

⁵⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

3 EDUCATION: FINDINGS, EVIDENCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TABLE 3. SNAPSHOT OF RELEVANT STATISTICS

- Rates of female literacy remain below male literacy (79.4 percent compared to 90 percent).⁶⁰
- Among people aged 15 to 49 who only attended primary school, 21.1 percent of women and 15.6 percent of men lack the skills to read simple sentences in Lao language.⁶¹
- 55.1 percent of children attending first grade also attended preschool in the previous year: 55.7 of boys and 54.4 percent of girls.
- In urban areas, 78.6 percent of children attending first grade also attended preschool in the previous year, compared with 47.9 percent in rural areas. (In rural areas, the percentages are 42.9 and 49.1 percent for areas without roads and with roads, respectively.)⁶²
- 23 percent of boys and 27.4 percent of girls aged 3 to 4 are developmentally on track in literacy-numeracy. There are significant differences: between urban (41.8 percent) and rural areas (18.8 percent); among ethnic groups (33.2 percent Lao-Tai, 16.3 percent Mon-Khmer, 12.7 percent Hmong-Mien, and 13.8 percent Sino-Tibetan); and among wealth quintiles (55.5 percent for the wealthiest and 11.5 percent for the poorest).⁶³
- Early childhood education (ECE) supports literacy-numeracy: 53 percent of children attending were on track, compared to 12 percent of children who did not attend ECE.⁶⁴
- Only 53 percent of persons with disabilities are literate, including 40 percent of women with disabilities and 90 percent of men with disabilities.⁶⁵

3.1 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings and recommendations are presented below in order of priority, based on issues identified by key informants and stakeholders and in key reports from the literature review.

3.1.1 QUALITY OF EDUCATION

“When women have more education they have more choices, and this benefits the workforce 15 years later.”

– Key Informant

Low levels of learning impact children more than lack of access to schools. There are shortages of basic school supplies (chalk, paper, pens, and pencils) and textbooks. Moreover, the shift in curriculum to active learning is resisted by some teachers, and most teachers are not able to diagnose learning differences or to use different accommodations to address them.

⁶⁰ World Economic Forum. 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report. March 2021 Insight Report*. Geneva, Switzerland. ([Link](#))

⁶¹ Government of Lao PDR. 2017. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey*. Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁶² Government of Lao PDR. 2017. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey*. Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁶³ GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁶⁴ UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

⁶⁵ GOL. 2018. *Disability Monograph of Lao from Population Housing Census 2015*. Lao Statistics Bureau.

- Expand support for training, coaching, and mentoring among in-service (and pre-service) teachers to effect changes in pedagogy, interactions, and diagnostics, including:
 - Teaching Lao as a second language
 - Active learning that motivates learning, experimentation, and “teachable” mistakes
 - Identification of disabilities or learning differences
 - Use of accommodations to support students with learning differences
 - Use of positive discipline approaches to supplant practices of violent discipline (i.e., corporal punishment), bullying, and SRGBV
- Continue to support increases in the availability of textbooks so every student can take them home.
- Continue to support parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to improve school management and performance, with balanced participation of fathers and mothers.
- Support expansion in availability and quality of ECE programs and facilities, prioritizing underserved areas.

Vocational education or training programs are not well aligned with existing and prospective labor market demand or emerging opportunities. Public-private partnerships for skills training are effective when matched with market demand for services, such as Toyota auto repair workshops that position youth for formal employment or self-employment. PTAs and school boards can invite businesses to contribute to STEM through mentoring, school talks, and support such as in-kind contributions to school renovations and targeted vocational training.

- Support public-private sector partnerships for skills development, in-kind contributions, employment, and self-employment for youth.

Girls and young women are underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects.

- Provide scholarships in STEM subjects, and networking opportunities, for female students and students from underrepresented ethno-linguistic groups who commit to pursuing careers in the energy sector.

3.1.2 EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Inequitable learning outcomes and dropout rates persist, especially among girls in ethnic minority regions and children with disabilities. Gender norms limit educational opportunities for both girls and boys, depending on the context. Parents in remote areas are more likely to pull children from school.

- Expand scholarship opportunities for students and young women from underrepresented ethnic-linguistic groups to incentivize continuing education and student retention.

- Advocate with the GOL to support student stipends/daily allowance for children from underrepresented ethno-linguistic groups, to incentivize school attendance and invest in equality of opportunity for Lao PDR's future workforce.
- Support second-chance learning options for older students who can no longer reenter or integrate into formal education.

“Only rarely are people with disabilities visible. Many cases remain undiagnosed.”

– Key Informant

Families discourage children with disabilities from attending schools, resulting in girls with disabilities being more likely to stay home. Textbook narratives and teaching styles reinforce gender stereotypes. There is a tendency to stigmatize children with disabilities. Moreover, schools are not accessible; they lack assistive and adaptive technology and devices that could support learning for children with disabilities, and teachers are not able to diagnose disabilities, nor required to report them.

- Expand availability (publication and promotion) of gender-equitable and disability-inclusive storylines in books and textbooks, to reinforce equality of opportunity based on human potential and to question discriminatory or harmful norms.
- Provide assistive and adaptive technology and devices to support learning for children with disabilities.
- Collaborate with local and international partners in advocating for the GOL to integrate inclusive education more definitively in the 2021–2025 Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP).
- Provide support and training for teachers in primary schools to better identify and diagnose learning and other disabilities.

3.1.3 VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND SRGBV

“Making ending violence within schools an indicator for education programs would be a way of mainstreaming child protection within education.”

– Key Informant

While there is little research and evidence in Lao PDR of prevalence of SRGBV, this does not mean it is non-existent. SRGBV affects dropout rates and influences parental decisions on keeping children out of school, especially girls. It can be perpetrated by teachers, staff, other students, or members of the school community, and may occur during travel to and from school as well as at school.

- Support a survey to have a better understanding of the prevalence of GBV, as well as qualitative research on the barriers that girls and boys face in accessing those services and what measures may be required for prevention and response. Integrate the findings and recommendations from the survey and qualitative research into all mission's education sector awards.

- Establish an information management system in collaboration with MOES to collect disaggregated data on SRGBV (gender, locale, and ethno-linguistic group) in collaboration with schools, health centers, and police, to link information on all cases handled at the community level with the national level. Integrate that system in all mission education sector awards.
- Develop a behavior change communication strategy with the MOES to challenge the belief that using violence is acceptable or “normal” and in some cases justified for disciplining children. Apply that strategy to all mission education sector awards.
- Develop and distribute a teacher and parent education guide (or infographic) with key messages on integrating early childhood development, nutrition, and child protection concerns, including violence against children.

3.1.4 COVID-19 AND DISTANCE LEARNING

“Education is crucial, but online learning only partially works for children depending on access. Digital learning is only as successful as the means for accessing it.”

– Key Informant

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to improve forms of distance learning, which could benefit students well beyond the pandemic. Digital platforms should continue to be strengthened, but these are only useful if families have access to and can afford internet connections—which (key informants note) are limited in rural and remote locales.⁶⁶ Radio programming has been used effectively in other countries and should be explored as a potential medium for strengthening continuing education and distance learning.

- Continue to support improvements in digital platforms to strengthen distance learning.
- Explore radio programming to strengthen distance learning for children who are taken out of schools in remote areas and who may live too far from secondary schools; the successful Australian “School of the Air” provides an example.

3.1.5 ACCESS TO EDUCATION

There is limited data and information on menstrual hygiene management in schools. An estimated 34 percent of schools have no water or sanitation, and menstruation remains a taboo subject, not easily discussed either at home or at school. WASH in schools supports education for both girls and boys, benefiting not only girls who have reached puberty but also female teachers who are menstruating and need privacy. Improved WASH facilities might help to address the high rates of absenteeism among teachers, the majority of whom are women.

- Support open discussions about menstruation among older children, girls, teachers, and administrators to reduce the shame associated with menstruation; provide guidance on how to manage menstruation hygienically.

⁶⁶ Key stakeholder interviews.

3.2 DATA AND EVIDENCE

In 2014, Lao PDR spent 2.9 percent of GDP on public education—lower than the regional average (4.7 percent) but average for the country’s income group (4.5 percent).⁶⁷ The World Bank’s HCI calculates that a child who starts school at age 4 in Lao can expect to complete 10.6 years of school but the learning-adjusted years of schooling amount to 6.3 years. On harmonized test scores, students in Lao scored an average of 368, on a scale where 625 represents advanced and 300 represents minimal attainment.⁶⁸

This section identifies key areas for gender inclusion in the education sector, drawing on gender-related opportunities and constraints as highlighted by key informants and stakeholders, and in the literature review and SOW. Data and evidence are presented in the following subsections: literacy; access; quality; equity (including early grade reading and school readiness, and inclusive education); violence against children (including patterns of discipline and punishment, and school-related gender-based violence); and the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2.1 LITERACY

Lao PDR has made significant progress in increasing literacy and education levels. The overall literacy rate increased from 72.7 percent (2005 Census) to 84.7 percent (2015 Census). There are over 300,000 illiterate youth in the Lao PDR (aged 15 to 24 years), including 60 percent of youth who attended primary school.⁶⁹ UNICEF’s 2020 Country Report and key informants highlight the importance of focusing not only on out-of-school children and young people, but also on children who attend primary school and yet do not learn to read. This issue is largely due to low teacher capacity, especially in rural areas, as well as the lack of basic school supplies and textbooks.⁷⁰ Across wealth quintiles, relatively few children have three or more books to read at home. Percentages decline from richest (at 36 percent), fourth (14.3 percent), middle (10.3 percent), second (8.9 percent), to poorest quintile (4.8 percent).⁷¹ These percentages are also low across ethno-linguistic groups: Lao-Tai (15.4 percent), Mon-Khmer (8.4 percent), Hmong-Mien (12.2 percent), and Sino-Tibetan (12.4 percent).⁷²

The 2017 Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS-II) shows that fully 59 percent of people aged 15 to 30 who only attended primary school lack the necessary skills to read simple sentences.⁷³ This means that in Lao PDR there are many more illiterate adults than adults who never attended school, pointing to failures of the education system to equip young people with needed skills. Rural schools especially lack qualified pre-primary and early primary teachers capable of addressing barriers to literacy in their classrooms;

⁶⁷ World Bank. 2020. *Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Human Capital Index 2020*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁷⁰ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁷¹ GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

they sometimes must rely on unpaid volunteers, local teachers with limited Lao language skills, or Lao teachers who do not speak or understand the student's mother tongue.⁷⁴

The LSIS-II calculates that, among ethnic groups, Lao-Tai adults are most literate (at 84 percent and 76 percent, for males and females respectively), with Sino-Tibetan groups least literate (50 percent and 35 percent, for males and females respectively). Literacy rates are also low for Mon-Khmer (at 70 percent and 40 percent) and Hmong-Mien (71 percent and 35 percent). Illiteracy has decreased across generations, especially for males. Nearly half of women between 35 to 49 years are illiterate, in comparison with 28 percent of men in the same age range. Sex-based differences in literacy decrease among younger age groups, but even among the 15 to 17 age group there is a 6-percentage point gap between girls and boys (at 11 percent and 17 percent, respectively).

3.2.2 ACCESS

Lao PDR is close to achieving gender parity in attendance at each level of education, based on adjusted net attendance ratios of girls to boys: primary (0.99), secondary education (1.04), and upper secondary (1.03).⁷⁵ Enrollment rates at primary-entry age (5 years old) increased from 70.9 percent (2015/2016) to 82.7 percent (2019/2020), and Grade 1 repetition decreased from 11.5 percent to 6.3 percent over the same period.⁷⁶ Primary cohort completion rates have also improved, from 77.9 percent (2015/16) to 79.9 percent (2019/2020). Completion (or “survival”) rates are nearly equal between the sexes: primary level (83 percent of girls, 84 percent of boys); lower secondary (53 percent of girls, 54 percent of boys); and upper secondary (31 percent of girls and 32 percent of boys).⁷⁷ However, primary school completion rates vary in relation to wealth quintile, location, and ethno-linguistic group.

Survival rates for primary school (the number of children completing as a percentage of initial enrollment) are lowest for children of mothers with no education (68.5 percent), children from the poorest quintile (58 percent), and children from villages without road access (68 percent).⁷⁸ Based on LSIS-II data, children aged 11 to 14 years in the lowest wealth quintile have primary completion rates 30 percentage points lower than children from less poor households; those from non-Lao-Tai speaking households have primary completion rates about 10 percent lower than those from Lao-Tai speaking households.⁷⁹

Overall, around one-third of the working age population has completed primary school and another one-third completed secondary school, with few gender differences in educational attainment.⁸⁰ However, key informants cite that disparities based on ethnicity, residence, and socioeconomic status

⁷⁴ USAID. 2019. *USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report*. Save the Children, Vientiane.

⁷⁵ GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁷⁶ GOL. 2020. *Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025*. Ministry of Education and Sport.

⁷⁷ UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People's Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ GOL. 2017. Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey. Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

⁸⁰ GOL. 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

persist.⁸¹ For example, the urban population is much better educated, with 66.3 percent having completed primary school or above, in comparison with less than 40 percent in rural areas.⁸² Key informants also note that girls tend to drop out beginning around fifth grade, especially in Hmong communities, where education for girls is less valued.⁸³ This has negative impacts on the workforce and available skill sets.

UNICEF (2020) provides a detailed examination of data from the 2017 LSIS-II identifying a range of issues that prevent Lao children and youth from accessing quality education.⁸⁴ That report highlights the need for targeted interventions to improve education for disadvantaged groups—those from poorer families, those living in more rural and remote areas, and certain ethnic groups. This echoes findings from other reports such as the 2019 USAID/Laos Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report, which notes that **children from non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups continue to face “significant and multifaceted barriers” to literacy and educational achievement**—such as higher rates of poverty, lower rates of school completion and adult literacy, lack of access to infrastructure, harmful cultural norms related to education, gender bias, and the mandate to learn in Lao language.⁸⁵

Although there is limited data, another factor is likely menstrual hygiene management. An estimated 34 percent of schools have no water or sanitation.⁸⁶ UNICEF (2016) highlights that more evidence is needed in Lao PDR about how water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in schools can improve children’s health and can lead to higher numbers of students finishing primary and secondary education.⁸⁷ The report also notes that menstruation remains a taboo subject, not easily discussed either within homes or at school. It recommends eliminating the silence and shame around menstruation through open discussions among older children, and equipping girls, teachers, and administrators with the knowledge and means to manage menstruation hygienically.⁸⁸

WASH in schools supports education for both girls and boys, benefiting not only girls who have reached puberty but also female teachers who are menstruating and need privacy.

Improved WASH facilities might help to address the high rates of absenteeism among teachers, the majority of whom are women. Teacher absenteeism is cited as the predominant reason preventing children from attending school, at all levels: primary (83 percent), lower secondary (79 percent), and upper secondary (83 percent).⁸⁹

⁸¹ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁸² GOL. 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

⁸³ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁸⁴ UNICEF conducted a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey-Education Analysis for Global Learning and Equity (MIS-EAGLE) for Lao PDR, with the aim of providing systematic in-depth data analysis to support policy planning, monitoring, and advocacy.

⁸⁵ USAID. 2019. *USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report*. Save the Children, Vientiane.

⁸⁶ GOL. 2013. Education and Monitoring System (EMIS) 2012/2013. Cited in UNICEF. 2016. *Raising Clean Hands in Lao PDR: Joint Call to Action*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

⁸⁷ UNICEF. 2016. *Raising Clean Hands in Lao PDR: Joint Call to Action*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

⁸⁸ WaterAid. 2012. *Menstrual Hygiene Matters – A Resource for Improving Menstrual Hygiene around the World*. Cited in UNICEF. 2016. *Raising Clean Hands in Lao PDR: Joint Call to Action*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

⁸⁹ UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

3.2.3 QUALITY

“Quality education is the big question for now, and the limited capacity of the teachers themselves. Some are not open to the active learning approach which involves more student participation. Teachers may resist this.”

– Key Informant

Quality of education affects repetition rates in early primary grades as well as low literacy levels, low transition rates, and high dropout rates. UNICEF’s analysis of LSIS-II data notes that students from low socioeconomic and non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups are most affected, and that child labor and early marriage were additional factors to be addressed for those of secondary school age. It also suggests that parental engagement with both the school and in supporting their children’s educational development influences outcomes. Coverage of school governance and management in the LSIS-II was limited to noting the existence of functioning school committees and parental engagement. Subsequent workshops and consultations undertaken by UNICEF with central government stakeholders identified several factors that contribute to the poor quality of education: weak management at school and district levels; insufficient monitoring of principals and teachers; information gaps; and limited budgeting for education development.

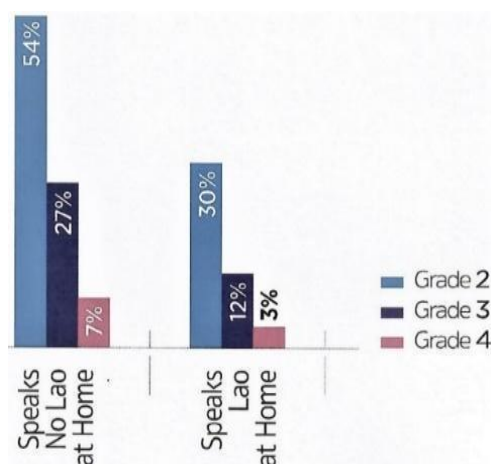
In 2017, the World Bank conducted a Survey Systems Approach for Better Education Results Service Delivery (SABER SD) survey to assess student learning in Lao PDR.⁹⁰ The SABER SD instrument examines four key elements in an education system: learner preparedness; teacher knowledge and motivation; availability of inputs; and school management and governance. The resulting 2018 report highlights a “learning crisis” in Lao PDR, providing an overview of challenges and policy priorities.⁹¹ The survey results reveal that, on average, students can correctly answer only 23 percent of math questions and 58 percent of questions in the Lao language, indicating that more children suffer from low levels of learning at school than from lack of access. Significant numbers of students are not achieving even the most basic levels of literacy and numeracy. Nearly 19 percent of fourth-grade students were unable to identify three letters of the Lao alphabet, and more than a quarter of students were unable to read three words correctly. In mathematics, a quarter of students were unable to add single-digit numbers correctly, 45 percent were unable to arrange numbers from small to large, and 15 percent of students were unable to identify at least three numbers. These levels of insufficient learning in primary school leave students unprepared for secondary school, especially among students for whom Lao is a second language.⁹² This is evident in the percentages of students unable to read even one word, disaggregated by those who speak Lao at home and those who do not (Figure 1).

⁹⁰ Demas, Angela, Myra Murad Khan, Gustavo Arcia, and Emiko Naka. 2018. *Delivery of Education Services in Lao PDR: Results of the SABER Service Delivery Survey, 2017*. World Bank. Washington, DC.

⁹¹ Demas, Angela, Emiko Naka, and Jennifer A. Mason. 2018. *The Learning Crisis in Lao PDR: Challenges and Policy Priorities*. Systems Approach for Better Education Results, World Bank and Ministry of Education and Sports.

⁹² Most students failed to perform double-digit subtraction (74 percent); multiplication of single, double, or triple digits (77 percent, 84 percent, and 87 percent, respectively); and division of single or double digits (67 and 86 percent, respectively). When asked to read an 83-word paragraph, students could read only about half of the words correctly and answer only about half of the comprehension questions on the passage. Demas, Angela, Myra Murad Khan, Gustavo Arcia, and Emiko Naka. 2018. *Delivery of Education Services in Lao PDR: Results of the SABER Service Delivery Survey, 2017*. World Bank. Washington, DC.

Figure 1. Students not able to read one word: Early Grade Reading Assessment⁹³



Source: World Bank. 2016. *Reducing Early Grade Drop Out and Low Learning Achievement in Lao PDR: Root-causes and Possible Interventions*. Washington, D.C.

The MOES has disseminated results from the learning outcomes assessment for Grade 9, which reaffirm the finding that Lao children are in school but not learning. The MOES has also launched the Southeast Asia-Primary Learning Metrics Grade 5 assessment, which will provide more data on learning outcomes. The 2021 UN Progress Report highlights the need to accelerate reforms and strengthen the capacity of government officials in delivering quality education services, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Key aims in the current ESSDP are to address poor learning outcomes and inequalities.

3.2.4 EQUITY

The new 2021–2025 ESSDP aims to reduce disparities—among girls and boys, ethnic groups, rich and poor—especially across the list of 40 disadvantaged districts identified by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) based on social development and education indicators.⁹⁴ Given fiscal constraints, this plan also highlights the importance of using the ministry’s human and financial resources more efficiently while reducing disparities, as well as to improve gender equity among administrative staff, noting that there are few women in senior positions in Provincial Education and Sports Services, in District Education and Sports Bureaus, and among school principals.

EARLY GRADE READING AND SCHOOL READINESS. ECE programs, such as preschools and kindergarten, have expanded to 142 districts out of a total of 148; over 60 percent of the 5-year-old population is enrolled, at near gender parity (with Gender Parity Index rates of between 0.99 and 1.10).⁹⁵ In spite of this significant progress, there is still unmet demand for ECE expansion to better address geographical disparities, particularly for disadvantaged groups and districts. Just as important,

⁹³ This early grade reading assessment may not be representative, as it was undertaken in a sample of schools that did not include remote, small, or ethnic schools (with more than 50 percent of the population being non-Lao-Tai).

⁹⁴ These districts have poor educational performance and are in food insecure and remote areas. They are also severely under-staffed and must rely more on multi-grade teaching, volunteer teachers, or non-subject specialist teachers. GOL. 2020. *Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025*. Ministry of Education and Sport.

⁹⁵ GOL. 2020. *Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025*. Ministry of Education and Sport.

many ECE teachers still need training on the new pre-primary curriculum, ECE administrators lack management training, and some ECE facilities are in poor condition and lack WASH facilities.⁹⁶

Data from the LSIS-II provide strong evidence that investing in ECE programs better prepares children for primary school and promotes more equitable outcomes in educational achievement. Increasing ECE participation among Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien, and Sino-Tibetan children could lead to better educational achievement, narrowing the gap in primary and secondary education outcomes that stem from language skills differences.⁹⁷ Supporting teachers in ECE programs to learn how to teach Lao as a second language would also help to bridge the language gap.

Children whose parents are unable to send them to Lao-language ECE demonstrate slower learning progress, and often do not learn to read and write in the early grades.⁹⁸ Over half (53 percent) of children attending ECE are on track in terms of literacy-numeracy, compared with only 12 percent of children who did not attend ECE.⁹⁹ However, data reveal strong socioeconomic and location-related inequalities in ECE attendance. More than twice as many children from the richest quintile (88 percent) attend ECE before primary school in comparison with the poorest quintile (36 percent).¹⁰⁰ A higher percentage of urban children than those living in rural areas attend ECE, and there are also extreme variations between provinces. As many as 90 percent of children starting primary school in Xayabury Province came from an early learning program, compared to only 25 percent of those in Savannakhet Province.

In addition, Save the Children's 2018 Literacy Boost assessment found that ethnicity had the strongest correlation with early reading ability for children: Hmong and Mon-Khmer children scored significantly lower than Lao-Tai children in all skill areas.¹⁰¹ Assessing literacy-numeracy measures three capacities: 1) reading four simple words; 2) identifying and naming at least 10 letters of the alphabet; and 3) recognizing numbers from one to ten. Figure 2 shows these three metrics disaggregated by area, age, ECE attendance, functional difficulties, ethno-linguistic group, and wealth quintile. Overall, approximately one-third (34 percent) of children in Lao PDR know their names and the numbers, and only 21 percent can read four simple words. Percentages are lower for children from rural areas, children whose home language is not Lao, poorer children, and those who did not attend ECE. Name and number recognition increases to 61 percent for those who attended ECE, compared with 21 percent for those who did not.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ GOL. 2017. "Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey." Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

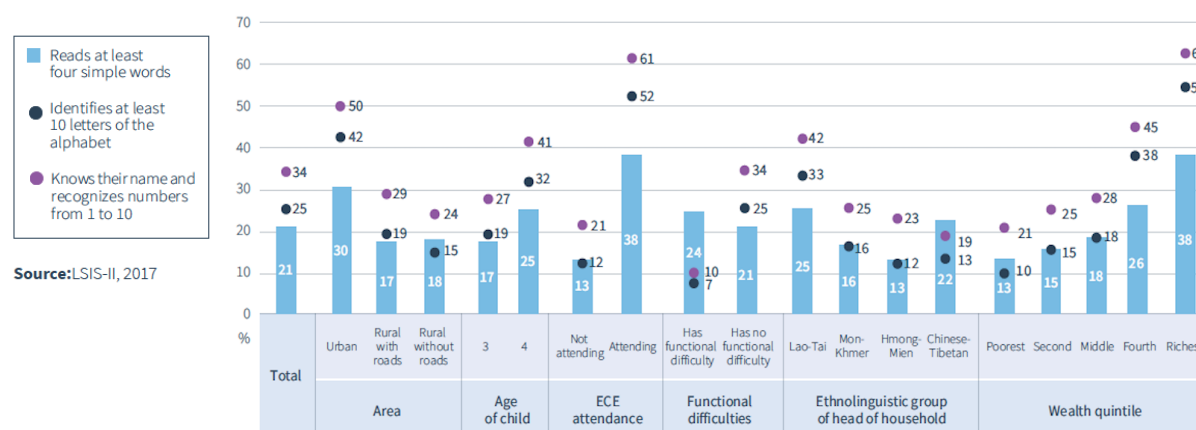
⁹⁸ USAID. 2019. USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report. Save the Children, Vientiane.

⁹⁹ GOL. 2017. "Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey." Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

¹⁰⁰ UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People's Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

¹⁰¹ LEAPS II. 2018. Literacy Boost Performance Monitoring, Savannakhet Province.

Figure 2. Percentage of children aged three to four years developmentally on track in literacy-numeracy domains



Adapted from: UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People's Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION. Students with disabilities face greater barriers to education, including lack of adapted school infrastructure, lack of inclusive teaching and learning materials, and lack of assistive devices to support learning. **Just over half (53 percent) of persons with disabilities are literate. Only 40 percent of women with disabilities are literate, compared to 90 percent of men with disabilities.**¹⁰² According to the 2015 Disability Monograph of Lao PDR, the types of disability that most strongly affect education outcomes are those related to hearing, communicating, and memory, with nearly 60 percent of persons with these difficulties never attending school.

“Funding for disabilities is always very small, just enough to help a few hundred children in pilot activities. What is needed is investment in identification, referral mechanisms, and social and behavior change to reduce stigma, which is still very entrenched in society.”

— Key Informant

Key informants confirm the 2018 USAID Lao PDR Gender Analysis on Disability findings that few schools can appropriately accommodate children and youth with disabilities, and there is limited awareness among parents and educators.¹⁰³ Most schools do not have a budget for ensuring physical access, assistive and adaptive technology, and devices for inclusive teaching, or specialized instruction. Children with disabilities are not “seen” in school, with many kept at home due to stigma as well as the lack of accessible facilities, assistive and adaptive technology, or other accommodations.¹⁰⁴ Disabilities are undiagnosed and underreported; schools are not required to collect disaggregated data on disability—increasing the likelihood that the needs of students with mild disabilities will be unmet. Sex-disaggregated data on enrollment is not available. **As many as 43 percent of children with**

¹⁰² GOL. 2018. Disability Monograph of Lao from Population Housing Census 2015. Lao Statistics Bureau.

¹⁰³ Key stakeholder interviews; and USAID. 2018. USAID Lao PDR Gender Analysis on Disability: Final Gender Analysis Report. Regional Development Mission, Bangkok.

¹⁰⁴ USAID. 2019. USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report. Save the Children, Vientiane.

disabilities have never enrolled in primary school (compared to 9.6 percent of the general population).¹⁰⁵

Distance is a fundamental barrier to enrolling in and pursuing education, especially for children in remote rural areas. Children with physical disabilities may not be able to walk to school, and parents may not be able to bring them every day.¹⁰⁶ Specialized schools for children with disabilities are found only in Vientiane Capital Municipality and Luang Prabang Province.¹⁰⁷ Transportation and distance challenges affect boys and girls with disabilities differently; girls are more likely to be kept home out of fear of sexual assault and in keeping with norms that do not prioritize education for girls (especially for girls with disabilities).¹⁰⁸ Children with disabilities may experience teasing and bullying, increasing their dropout rates.¹⁰⁹

Understanding and use of accommodations could benefit children with different learning strengths and abilities. Accommodations include any technique that adapts an academic setting or environment for learning but does not change the content of the required work. General accommodations can include environmental, organizational, behavioral, and presentation strategies. Some accommodations can be as straightforward as providing quiet spaces for studying, movement breaks, or extra time for test taking.¹¹⁰

UNICEF asserts that more data as well as action is needed on inclusive education. The 2020 MIS-EAGLE report for Lao PDR recommends that the GOL integrate inclusive education more definitively in the 2021–2025 ESSDP, noting that the previous 2016–2020 ESSDP referenced inclusive education only in relation to teacher training and the Inclusive Education Policy that has since ended.

3.2.5 VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

In 2014, the Lao Statistics Bureau and National Commission for Mothers and Children (currently, NCAWMC) conducted Lao PDR's first national Violence Against Children Survey, with technical and financial support from UNICEF and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹¹¹ The survey provides reliable estimates of the prevalence of physical, emotional, and sexual violence against children, as an essential first step toward measurement and prevention. **The results of the survey reveal that violence against children is widespread and common, with more than one-third of girls and boys subjected to some form of violence. In addition, around 10 percent of children experience some form of sexual abuse; only 5.2 percent of girls know where to get help if they are sexually abused, compared to 57.8 percent of boys.**

¹⁰⁵ GOL. 2018. Disability Monograph of Lao from Population Housing Census 2015. Lao Statistics Bureau.

¹⁰⁶ USAID. 2019. USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report. Save the Children, Vientiane.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ USAID. 2018. USAID Lao PDR Gender Analysis on Disability: Final Gender Analysis Report. Regional Development Mission, Bangkok.

¹⁰⁹ USAID. 2019. USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report. Save the Children, Vientiane.

¹¹⁰ The use of Section 504 Accommodations is not uncommon in the United States. This is an example of sample accommodations and modifications: ([Link](#))

¹¹¹ National Commission for Mothers and Children, Lao Statistics Bureau, and UNICEF Lao PDR. 2016. Preliminary Report.

A 2018 UNICEF Report offers priority actions and a multi-sectoral response to end violence against children in Lao PDR, highlighting three main areas that together provide a framework for action: 1) enhancing the enabling environment by implementing and enforcing laws and policies that protect children from violence, establishing systematic national data collection and research, strengthening capacity of all who work with and for children, and improving management and coordination in child protection; 2) changing attitudes and behaviors to promote respect and nonviolence, supporting parents, caregivers, and families, and empowering children to protect themselves; and 3) responding to violence against children by providing timely referral and access to appropriate support services, bringing perpetrators to justice, and preventing re-offending.¹¹²

DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT. The 2017 LSIS-II examines data on child discipline methods experienced during the last month for children aged one to 14 years old, including verbal intimidation and physical force.¹¹³ Although no information is provided about school environments, the data provides insights into child disciplining practices that may influence teachers in the classroom. **Over two-thirds (65.8 percent) of adult respondents had used psychological punishment (66.9 percent of males and 64.7 percent of females). Physical punishment (of any kind) was used on 33.6 percent of children (36.2 percent males and 30.9 percent females).** Severe physical punishment was used in 4.7 percent of cases of punishment (5.5 percent males and 3.8 percent females). Use of severe punishment was most prevalent in Xaysomboune province (16.8 percent of adult respondents) and Luangnamtha province (14.4 percent), in households where the mother had no education or ECE (6 percent), and among Sino-Tibetan (10.8 percent) and Hmong-Mien (8 percent) households.

LSIS-II data indicate that 25.3 percent of mothers/caretakers believe that physical punishment is needed to “bring up, raise, or educate a child” aged one to 14 years (27.2 percent of men and 25.3 percent of women respondents). These beliefs do not vary significantly by age: less than 25 years old (25 percent); 25 to 34 years (24 percent); 35 to 49 years (25.9 percent); over 50 years (28.9 percent). In addition, respondents with less education were generally more likely to believe in the need to use physical punishment: adults with no education or ECE (29.7 percent); primary school (24.5 percent); lower secondary (25.7 percent); upper secondary (20.5 percent); post-secondary/non-tertiary (22.3 percent); and higher education (18 percent). Among ethno-linguistic groups this belief is strongest in Sino-Tibetan households (46.1 percent), followed by Hmong-Mien (28.8 percent), Mon-Khmer (28.6 percent), and Lao-Tai (22.4 percent).

Studies in other countries posit that exposing a child to violent discipline has harmful consequences that can hamper children’s development, learning abilities, and school performance.¹¹⁴ The LSIS-II elaborates

¹¹² NCAW and UNICEF. 2018. Ending violence against children in Lao PDR: A multi-sectoral response to the National Violence against Children Survey.

¹¹³ Randomly selected mothers or caretakers of children under age five and those with children aged five to 17 were asked a series of questions on the methods that adults in the household use to discipline a child in the past month and if the respondent believes that physical punishment is a necessary part of child-rearing. GOL. 2017. “Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey.” Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

¹¹⁴ Straus, MA, and MJ Paschall. 2009. “Corporal Punishment by Mothers and Development of Children’s Cognitive Ability: A longitudinal study of two nationally representative age cohorts.” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 18(5): 459-83.; Erickson, MF and B. Egeland, 1987. “A Developmental View of the Psychological Consequences of Maltreatment.” *School Psychology Review* 16: 156-68.; and Schneider, MW, et al. 2005. “Do Allegations of Emotional Maltreatment Predict Developmental Outcomes Beyond that of Other Forms of Maltreatment?” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 29(5): 513–32.

that the impacts of this violence can range from immediate harm to long-term effects that children carry into adult life, potentially inhibiting positive relationships and leading to low self-esteem, emotional distress, depression, and even risk-taking and self-harm.

SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE. USAID’s 2019 Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis report suggests that, while there is little research and evidence in Lao PDR of incidents of school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), this does not mean it is non-existent.

SRGBV affects dropout rates within schools, especially for girls, and influences parental decisions on keeping children out of school.¹¹⁵ SRGBV can be perpetrated by teachers, staff, other students, and members of the school community, and may occur during travel to and from school and at school (e.g., in empty classrooms, toilets, or playgrounds).

3.2.6 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Lao PDR had inadequate learning outcomes due to inequality in educational opportunities, poor learning outcomes, and low skills acquisition, especially among the most vulnerable (poor children and those living in rural and remote areas). The pandemic has further aggravated the situation.¹¹⁶ **The World Bank’s August 2021 Economic Monitor report notes that about 21 percent of households reported a decline in the quality of education because of the COVID-19 pandemic and second lockdown.**¹¹⁷ Children undertook fewer learning activities during the second school closure, with only 16 percent of households engaging children in learning activities during the second wave of school closures, compared to 24 percent during the first wave of school closures. The loss was even greater in rural areas, where only 11 percent of households engaged children in learning activities. Moreover, while 33 percent of urban households had their children communicate with teachers during school closures, only 22 percent of rural households did so.

3.3 ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

Below are 2021 U.S. Government standard foreign assistance (F) indicators that USAID/Laos may consider for use in monitoring, evaluation, and learning in this sector.

TABLE 4. EDUCATION: KEY ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS BY KEY ISSUE

KEY ISSUE	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
Quality	<p>ES.I-1 Percent of learners targeted for USG assistance who attain minimum grade-level proficiency in reading at the end of grade 2, disaggregated by sex (and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>ES.I-2 Percent of learners targeted for USG assistance who attain minimum grade-level proficiency in reading at the end of primary school, disaggregated by sex (and ethno-linguistic group)</p>

¹¹⁵ NCAW and UNICEF. 2018. Ending violence against children in Lao PDR: A multi-sectoral response to the national Violence against Children Survey.

¹¹⁶ UN. 2021. 2020 Progress Report Lao PDR-United Nations Partnership Framework 2017-2021: A Partnership for Sustainable Development. Vientiane.

¹¹⁷ World Bank. 2021. Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region.

	<p>ES.1-6 Number of educators who complete professional development activities with USG assistance, disaggregated by sex (and locale – urban/rural, upland/lowland)</p> <p>ES.1-13 Number of parent teacher associations (PTAs) or community governance structures engaged in primary or secondary education supported with USG assistance</p> <p>ES.1-54 Percent of individuals with improved reading skills following participation in USG-assisted programs</p> <p>ES.6-12 Percent of individuals with new employment following participation in USG-assisted workforce development programs (disaggregated by sex and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>Supp-12 Percent of individuals who pass a context-relevant assessment in technical, vocational, or professional skillset following participation in USG-assisted programs</p>
Equity	<p>ES.1-47 Percent of learners with a disability targeted for USG assistance who attain a minimum grade-level proficiency in reading at the end of grade 2</p> <p>ES.1-49 Number of primary or secondary textbooks and other teaching and learning material (TLM) that are inclusively representative provided with USG assistance</p> <p>Supp-8 Number of school learning environments built or upgraded with USG assistance in compliance with accessibility standards (disaggregated by locale: urban/rural, and upland/lowland)</p> <p>Supp-15 Education system strengthened: policy reform</p> <p>Custom Number of learning environments supported by USG assistance that have improved use of accommodations for students with learning differences, according to locally defined criteria, disaggregated by locale (urban/rural, and upland/lowland)</p>
SRGBV	<p>ES.1-51 Number of learning environments supported by USG assistance that have improved safety, according to locally defined criteria</p> <p>Supp-16 Education system strengthened: data systems strengthened</p>
COVID-19	<p>Supp-14 Percent of individuals with improved digital literacy skills following participation in USG-assisted programs (disaggregated by sex and ethno-linguistic group)</p>

4 HEALTH: FINDINGS, EVIDENCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TABLE 5. SNAPSHOT OF RELEVANT STATISTICS

- Women face increased risk of COVID-19, as nearly 65 percent of the frontline health workers are female.¹¹⁸
- Adolescent birth rates remain high at around 83/1,000.¹¹⁹
- 18.4 percent women (age 20–24 years) have given birth before age 18, with 10 percent of these before age 15.¹²⁰
- Unmet need for family planning is 75 percent among unmarried women and 14 percent among married women.¹²¹
- Lao PDR maternal mortality rate of 151/100,000 births is the highest of all ASEAN countries.¹²²
- Under-five child mortality rate is 46/1,000 live births.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Social Impact. 2021. USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment. USAID.

¹¹⁹ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistics Bureau and UNICEF.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ USAID. 2019. Laos Health Strategy (2019–2023).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistics Bureau and UNICEF.

- 33 percent of children under the age of five are moderately or severely stunted.¹²⁴
 - Prevalence rate for HIV is 0.3 percent for women and 0.4 percent for men (aged 15-49).¹²⁵
 - 41 percent of pregnant HIV-positive women receive WHO-recommended regimen to prevent parent-to-child transmission.¹²⁶
 - More than 95 percent of all malaria cases are in the five southern provinces of Champasack, Savannakhet, Saravane, Sekong, and Attapeu; 90 percent of those affected are young adult males.¹²⁷
-

4.1 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings and recommendations are presented below in order of priority, based on issues identified by key informants and stakeholders and in key reports from the literature review.

4.1.1 HEALTHCARE SYSTEM AND SERVICES

Health services/facilities in remote areas are inadequate, particularly in ethnic minority communities. Barriers to accessing health care, especially for women and girls, include long distance, language barriers, and lack of accessibility.

- Support decentralized access to maternal, neonatal, child, and family health care in rural areas, through free mobile care, expansion of rural health centers with accessibility for persons with disabilities, and support for village health volunteers, especially in rural areas.
- Collaborate with the Lao Women's Union (LWU), NCAW, and Sub-Committees for the Advancement of Women (SubCAWs) in support of the Ministry's Strategy for Gender Equality and Mother-Child in the Health Sector, 2019-2025.

Lack of capacity building and compensation for Village Health Workers (VHWs) affects knowledge, performance, and health outcomes, particularly for maternal, adolescent, and child health and persons with disabilities.

- Strengthen VHWs in collaboration with UNICEF, Ministry of Health, UNFPA, and WHO by exploring opportunities to improve compensation and training and capacity building, concentrating on greatest needs given poor health outcomes, such as nutrition and maternal and child health.
- Increase outreach to persons with disabilities through VHWs and health centers, including improved services and information on government-sponsored programs, such as availability of free prosthetics.

Language barriers and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and increased hesitancy to seek health care, especially for individuals from minority ethnic groups,

¹²⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistics Bureau and UNICEF.

¹²⁵ UNAIDS. 2021. "Country Factsheets: Lao People's Democratic Republic." ([Link](#))

¹²⁶ UNAIDS. 2021. "Lao PDR | HIV/AIDS Data Hub for the Asia-Pacific Region."

¹²⁷ USAID. 2019. *Laos Health Strategy (2019 – 2023)*.

persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons. Delayed health care can have negative impacts on health, sometimes with deadly consequences.

- Expand social and behavior change communication activities with health care professionals to create positive social norms around LGBTQI+ persons and persons with disabilities.
- Provide cultural sensitivity and awareness training to health care personnel working in ethnic minority areas, and provide support for local language interpretation.
- Increase diversity among VHWs through the placement and promotion of ethnic minority candidates, to reduce language barriers and improve cultural awareness and sensitivity in ethnic minority communities and areas.
- Produce easy to read (with visual images) health information brochures in local ethnic minority languages, covering critical health-related topics (e.g., maternal and child health, malaria prevention, infections and STI, and C-TIP).

Although 65 percent of frontline healthcare workers are women, female leadership in the healthcare system is low, especially in senior health management positions. In addition, there are more male VHWs than females, and few youth VHWs.

- Support increased female leadership in the healthcare system by advocating for the GOL target by 2025 of 30-percent female leadership at the central level and 20-percent at the provincial and district levels.
- Promote strategies that alleviate unpaid care work for healthcare workers, reduce time poverty, and increase opportunities for advancement within the healthcare system.
- Provide scholarship and research funding opportunities for female students and doctors, partnering with high schools and universities to encourage more girls to pursue medical school.
- Support mentoring by senior women health care providers with younger women, to encourage next-generation entry into the profession.
- Support diversity in VHWs with increased placement and promotion of women and youth, including from ethnic minority groups, as VHWs in collaboration with village councils, LWU, and LYU.

Women's access to and ability to make decisions about health care are fundamental to health outcomes for women and their families and are correlated with women's economic empowerment. A growing body of evidence suggests that increasing the share of household income controlled by women can have beneficial effects on nutrition, family planning, maternal mortality, and child mortality, and can also lead to increased investment in children's education, delayed marriage, and reductions in GBV.

- Integrate financial literacy and skills training into health interventions that increase knowledge and information about nutrition, family planning, and maternal and child health.

- Support social and behavioral change communication strategies that promote male engagement and shared health care decision-making among couples, while encouraging shared responsibilities in the care economy, women's access to and control over income and assets, and the benefits of education and delayed marriage for girls and boys.

4.1.2 MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Health facilities lack sufficient privacy areas for women and girls, and staff have limited clinical and counseling competencies related to adolescent reproductive health, contraceptives, family planning, and pre- and post-natal care. Adolescent pregnancy increases vulnerability to health concerns for both mother and child, and social stigma around early pregnancy increases reluctance to seek medical care, exacerbated by the pandemic.

- Establish privacy areas for women and girls at health centers and facilities for deliveries and consultations to improve services and confidentiality, especially in rural areas.
- Increase access to contraceptives and family planning counseling, through awareness campaigns (videos, consultations, digital platforms, radio/TV announcements) and by engaging health centers, VHWs, village committees, and district health extension workers in disseminating this information, including in ethnic minority languages.
- Encourage health workers to provide adolescent reproductive health/family planning information and consultation services in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner (by phone, online, and through VHWs).

Poor pre/post-natal care outcomes for women and children are largely a result of long distances to services, as well as a lack of knowledge about the health and nutrition needs of pregnant and lactating women. The support and involvement of male family members (i.e., husbands and fathers) in pre/post-natal care and delivery services would increase women's access to health facilities and lead to a better understanding of maternal and reproductive health care needs.

- Support social and behavior change communication campaigns and activities that promote positive male engagement in maternal and child health and nutrition.
- Promote positive male role models and/or champions (i.e., male influencers) who support women's pre/post-natal care and child health and nutrition, through social media, TV/Radio, WhatsApp, and bulletin boards at central, provincial, district, and village levels.

4.1.3 NUTRITION

Women and children's health and nutrition is negatively affected by food taboos and traditions, including restrictions on pregnant women or children not eating certain foods, women eating after other family members (when less food is available), and women doing hard labor even while pregnant. Women's workloads, including the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and household work, reduces time for preparing healthy meals.

There is also a lack of understanding about nutritional needs in the first 1,000 days (from conception to a child's second birthday), especially among ethnic minority women who are not fluent in the Lao language, because information is only published in the Lao language.

- Support nutrition programs/activities within primary schools and non-formal education programs to promote a healthy diet, working with parent-teacher associations and VHWs.
- Support social and behavioral change communication campaigns that promote new norms for optimal health, using approaches and messages that are sensitive to cultural differences and viewpoints.
- Connect young ethnic women and men to parenting courses that include modules on childcare, traditions and childrearing practices, health and growth monitoring, healthy food, and good hygiene practices.

4.1.4 GBV

The health sector lacks clinical management protocols for survivors of GBV, including referral procedures, standard reporting requirements, and protocols for coordination with multisectoral services such as the police, legal services, shelters, and rehabilitation services. This is especially necessary considering the increased prevalence of GBV due to COVID.

- Support a coordinated and expanded GBV prevention and response system, with clear referral pathways across sectors, organizations, and government entities, and with national guidelines for standard operating procedures.
- Provide targeted technical assistance to the SubCAWs to provincial, district, and village levels; provide support to the 2021-2025 National Plan of Action on Preventing and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Violence against Children (NPAVAWVAC).

4.1.5 PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Women with disabilities have less access to health services than men with disabilities, because rehabilitation services are mainly offered at central or provincial levels and women especially lack mobility. Women are also more likely to be the caregivers for persons with disabilities, which can impact their physical and mental health.

- Support accessibility and services at health facilities for persons with disabilities (i.e., ramps, assistive product services, sign language, and privacy rooms).
- Conduct information campaigns on available services and free government-sponsored services for persons with disabilities.
- Provide counseling support for caregivers of persons with disabilities through district health facilities, extension workers, and village health centers.

4.1.6 HIV/AIDS

Peer support groups and services for persons with HIV/AIDS are limited or nonexistent in rural areas. LGBTQI+ persons face great barriers in accessing effective HIV case-finding and continuity of treatment services due to many factors, including stigmatizing by health service providers. Testing is limited, and there is a need for increasing awareness about testing and treatment.

- Support the expansion of peer support groups for persons with HIV/AIDS to increase access to health services and information about testing and treatment.
- Provide capacity building and training to health care personnel to encourage more professional care and treatment of HIV/AIDS patients.

4.1.7 MALARIA

Women and men need increased knowledge of how malaria is contracted and how it can be prevented. Communication campaigns and data collection on malaria need to include targeted messages for women and minority ethnic groups. Increased access to testing is also needed.

- Promote the inclusion of women in communication campaigns and in collection of data regarding malaria transmission and prevention, through local health centers and VHWs.

4.2 DATA AND EVIDENCE

Lao PDR faces ongoing health disparities that impact its most vulnerable populations: women, children, persons with disabilities, and members of ethnic and rural communities. While inequalities in healthcare persist and have been exacerbated by COVID-19, improvements have been made through innovative legislation, community outreach, and partnerships with different organizations and United Nations (UN) agencies. Key health-related targets (by 2025) were identified in the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDPlan): prevalence of underweight in children under age five reduced to 15 percent; proportion of stunting among children under age five reduced to 27 percent; infant mortality rates reduced to 30 per 1,000 live births; and maternal mortality rates reduced to 110 per 100,000 live births.¹²⁸

This section identifies key areas for gender inclusion in the health sector, drawing on gender-related opportunities and constraints as highlighted by key informants and stakeholders, as well as in the literature review and SOW. Data and evidence are presented by subsector, as follows: maternal health; child health; nutrition; disabilities (including from unexploded ordnance incidents); HIV/AIDS; malaria; and the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There is a need to raise awareness with health care providers of how to provide services...by being more gender sensitive, creating a comfortable environment, and not discriminating. If a woman goes back to her village and

¹²⁸ Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2021. *The Five Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021-2025)*. (Approved by the inaugural session of the Ninth National Assembly on 22-26 March 2021 in accordance with the Resolution No. 20/NA, dated 26 March 2021).

shares that she had a comfortable experience at the health center, this will encourage more women and families to seek health care.”

– Key Informant

4.2.1 MATERNAL HEALTH

Lao PDR has had one of the highest adolescent birth rates in the ASEAN region, as well as the highest maternal mortality rate (MMR) at 185 deaths per 100,000 births in 2017.¹²⁹ These rates are higher in remote and poor areas, where 41.8 percent of 15–17-year-old girls are not educated.¹³⁰ This is intensified by unaddressed family planning needs. As many as 14.3 percent of married women and 75.4 percent of unmarried women lack access to contraceptives.¹³¹ Key informants cite as factors contributing to high MMR the lack of access to emergent prenatal care, poor nutrition, lack of trained birthing professionals, and food taboos.¹³²

Early marriage and adolescent pregnancy are high risk factors for young women and correlate with lower education attainment.¹³³ **Adolescent pregnancy is correlated with increased risk of maternal mortality, birth complications, and child stunting—problems that are intensified in rural areas with limited healthcare.**¹³⁴ **Nearly one-fifth (18.4 percent) of girls have given birth before turning 18 years old. Among these, 10 percent are girls under age 15, 37 percent are from the poorest regions, and 43 percent have little to no education.** Rates of adolescent pregnancy vary significantly by locale, education, ethnicity, and poverty status. The adolescent birth rate of 26/1,000 in Vientiane is less than one-fifth of the rate in Xaysomboune (138/1,000). Adolescent birthrates are highest among Hmong-Mien (192/1,000 births) and among the poor (156/1,000 births).¹³⁵ Women with no or little education have a 21.8 times higher risk of adolescent birth than women who completed their secondary education.¹³⁶

As corroborated by key informants, COVID-19 has exacerbated maternal health issues in Lao PDR. COVID-19 restrictions have created a sharp decrease in prenatal care, immunizations, access to and use of contraceptives, birth assistance, and post-natal care, especially for migrant workers, rural residents, and ethnic groups, impacting women and children’s health outcomes. Organizations such as UNFPA have forecasted a 15–23 percent increase in unplanned pregnancies¹³⁷ and a correlated 92 percent increase in the MMR,¹³⁸ as well as increases in domestic violence and child marriages. These risks will

¹²⁹ UNFPA. 2021. “UNFPA in Lao.”

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Key stakeholder interviews.

¹³³ The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support Program*. USAID.

¹³⁴ UNICEF. 2019. *The Situation of Children and Women Lao People’s Democratic Republic*.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ MPI. 2021. *COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR*. Vientiane and UNICEF Lao PDR.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

continue to rise linearly with the length of time that healthcare services remain limited. To address these healthcare disparities, the government of Lao PDR has participated in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) with the intent to address all unmet contraceptive needs, preventable maternal deaths, gender-based violence, adolescent pregnancy, and child marriage. They aspire to significantly mitigate these matters by 2030.¹³⁹

Key informants stated that the unequal burdens and responsibilities placed upon women greatly impacts their pre- and post-natal care, as they do not have time to properly take care of themselves during pregnancy.¹⁴⁰ Women need additional information on the importance of nutrition during their pregnancy. For ethnic minority communities, women feel uncomfortable seeking health care if the providers do not speak their language. In addition, girls do not feel comfortable seeking sexual reproductive health services, as they feel discriminated against and judged by some health care providers. It can be taboo among communities, in particular in rural areas, to seek consultation for contraceptives due to the perception of infidelity or promiscuous behavior.

“For future programs, the existing responsibilities of women need to be acknowledged and not place additional burdens upon them if trying to promote equal opportunity. In addition, one of the most important things is to target men, to help build their understanding, awareness, and sensitivity to gender issues... empowering men to help their wife during pre- and post-natal care, house cooking duties and childcare.”

— Key Informant

4.2.2 CHILD HEALTH

A child born in Lao PDR will be only 46 percent productive when she grows up, due to lack of adequate health care and quality education.¹⁴¹ This is lower than the average for the East Asia and Pacific region and for lower middle-income countries. As shared by key informants, young women lack confidence in seeking health care for themselves and their children; they need to be accompanied by a male figure (father, brother), who often are not available or do not give it priority.¹⁴² **It is critical to work with male figures within the household to build awareness of the importance of healthcare especially for young children.**

Lao PDR’s child survival rates are also problematic. Ninety-five percent of children born survive to age five.. **Only 82 percent of 15-year-olds survive to age 60, reflecting the poor health conditions and risks that children in poverty experience from birth.**¹⁴³ Concerning childhood mortality rates, 88 percent of deaths of children under five occur during the 12 months following birth (43 males and 37 females per 1,000 live births), and 39 percent of infant deaths occur during the first month of life (19 males and 17 females per 1,000 live births).¹⁴⁴ The mortality rate for children in rural areas under

¹³⁹ UNFPA. 2021. “UNFPA in Lao.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ World Bank. 2020. Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Human Capital Index 2020.

¹⁴² Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁴³ World Bank. 2020. *Lao People’s Democratic Republic Human Capital Index 2020*.

¹⁴⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistics Bureau, and UNICEF.

five is double that of urban areas (53/1,000 versus 24/1,000), and children from the poorest wealth quintile experience 2.8 times the mortality risk compared to the wealthiest (63/1,000 versus 23/1,000).¹⁴⁵ Ethnic variation also exists: the mortality rate for children under five is twice as high for Sino-Tibetans as for Lao-Tai (72/1,000 versus 35/1,000).¹⁴⁶ In addition, under-five mortality rates are nearly twice as high among mothers less than 20 years old compared to mothers age 20–34 (64/1,000 versus 37/1,000). Birth intervals are an additional factor in under-five mortality rates: less than two years spacing since the previous birth (83/1,000 mortality), two years spacing (45/1,000), and three years spacing (27/1,000).¹⁴⁷ These data suggest that increased attention needs to be given to early marriage and birth spacing in family planning.

“Educating people on how to take care of the mother and child’s health during the first 1000 days of life is the most important activity.”

– Key Informant

Some improvements have been made in under-five and infant mortality rates. From 1990 to 2015, the rates decreased by half, down to under-five mortality of 46/1,000 and infant mortality of 40/1,000.¹⁴⁸ However, infant and neonatal mortality has been increasing since 1990, and COVID-19 has hampered efforts to diminish child mortality rates. As stated by key informants, though COVID-19 largely impacts adults, children feel the impact of the socioeconomic difficulties facing families from quarantine and social restrictions.¹⁴⁹ For instance, lower employment has led to further nutritional deficiencies.¹⁵⁰ The government needs to take action to bolster the health, education, and nutrition systems country-wide to support vulnerable populations and facilitate both health and economic recovery.¹⁵¹ Currently, children born in Lao PDR can expect to be only 46 percent productive compared to children worldwide who have been educated and have full health—lower than the East Asian or the Pacific average.

4.2.3 NUTRITION

Child health in Lao PDR is compromised by nutritional factors, economic disparity, and untreated health risks. As stated by key informants, food taboos, limited diets, and lack of breastfeeding contribute to approximately one-third of Lao PDR children being growth stunted (defined by the WHO as “low height for age”).¹⁵²

Nutritionally, Lao PDR children are among the most undernourished children in Asia, with 33 percent of children experiencing stunted growth (34 percent male and 32 percent

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁵⁰ Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*. USAID.

¹⁵¹ World Bank. 2020. *Lao People’s Democratic Republic Human Capital Index 2020*.

¹⁵² Key stakeholder interviews.

female), and 21 percent being underweight (21.6 percent male and 20.6 percent female).¹⁵³ This can lead to a lifetime risk of cognitive and physical limitations.¹⁵⁴ Stunting varies regionally, especially affecting minority ethnic groups who live in upland areas: Hmong-Mein, Sino-Tibetans, and Mon-Khmer have the highest stunting rates, at 50.2 percent, 48.6 percent, and 43.3 percent respectively, in comparison with Lao-Tai at 23.2 percent. Stunting is present in children as young as 0–6 months, with 20 percent of this age group already stunted. Stunting has lifelong cognitive and physical impacts.¹⁵⁵ It is correlated with higher mortality, lower quality of life, lower education level, and lower socioeconomic status, and nationally with overall decreased income and development.¹⁵⁶

Lao PDR has one of the world's highest malnutrition rates.¹⁵⁷ The young age of stunting onset indicates poor maternal pre- and post-natal nutritional practices. As corroborated by key informants, the government of Lao PDR must prioritize improving women's nutrition and health prior to conception, especially in poor regions, as women from poor communities are both more likely to become pregnant and more likely to be undernourished and anemic than their urban peers.¹⁵⁸ Despite some improvement, the majority of these challenges are still prevalent¹⁵⁹ and have been worsened by COVID-19 restrictions, which have compromised many women and children's access to nutritional supplement programs.¹⁶⁰ Key informants shared that the reduced quantity and quality of food in response to reductions in household income has contributed to poor nutrition in Lao.¹⁶¹ These factors have disproportionately impacted pregnant women as well as young children, for whom school closures resulted in a loss of their school nutrition programs.¹⁶² Additionally, the rising costs of food and frequent or sustained agricultural supply chain disruptions have reduced food security and access to diverse nutritional options. Compromised access to affordable and diverse nutrition has increased malnutrition, particularly for women of reproductive age, leading to chronic health conditions.¹⁶³ For children, chronic malnutrition from lack of or limited food contributes to stunting, wasting, and negative physical and mental effects.¹⁶⁴

Key informants confirmed that gender norms—including expectations that women and adolescent girls forego food in favor of other family members, restrictions on what pregnant women may eat, and lack of awareness of diverse, healthy food groups—all contribute to poor nutritional outcomes for children

¹⁵³ Based on moderate and severe prevalence rates. Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistics Bureau, and UNICEF; USAID. 2019. "USAID Nurture Fact Sheet." ([Link](#))

¹⁵⁴ World Bank. 2020. *Lao People's Democratic Republic Human Capital Index 2020*.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Social Impact. 2019. *Impact Evaluation of USAID Nurture in Laos*. USAID.

¹⁵⁷ United Nations Lao PDR. 2021. *2020 Progress Report*.

¹⁵⁸ Key stakeholder interviews; and UNICEF. 2019. *Situation of Women and Children in Lao PDR*.

¹⁵⁹ USAID. 2018. "National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) Organization and Capacity Strengthening." ([Link](#))

¹⁶⁰ Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*. USAID.

¹⁶¹ Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁶² Key stakeholder interviews; and Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*.

¹⁶³ MPI. 2021. *COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR*. Vientiane and UNICEF Lao PDR.

¹⁶⁴ Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*.

and families.¹⁶⁵ There is a great need to engage the entire family in nutrition education, through community-based outreach programs, schools, and health facilities.

The Lao PDR government has established several food security and nutrition programs, community nutrition outreach, primary healthcare endorsement of nutrition, free assisted childbirth, and childcare for children under five. Complications of these programs were highlighted by key informants that included increased poverty due to land degradation, land use constraints, and investment projects impacting production areas; furthermore, traditional household practices differ from recommended nutritional practices, leading to low compliance.¹⁶⁶

To address stunting, national policies have been adopted in alignment with the UN's recommendations to increase the availability, access to, and usage of nutrition programs, especially the recommended infant and child feeding practices and hygiene maintenance. Additionally, the Agricultural Development Strategy for 2021–2030 was created to reinforce the environment to facilitate improvements in diverse, nutritious agriculture production paired with simultaneous increases in rural employment.¹⁶⁷ Key informants stated it was important to support the implementation of the strategy in coordination with nutrition interventions.¹⁶⁸

According to the Lao Women's Union Strategic Plan for 2021-2025, women will be the main target groups for nutrition activities. However, as corroborated by key informants, male engagement is also needed to improve understanding about the nutritional needs of pregnant women and young children and to support normative shifts toward balanced shared care and household work. Key informants suggest that there are opportunities to engage with the Lao Women's Union to ensure women and children receive adequate nutrition, practice food hygiene, and have access to nutritious foods from each of the five food groups.¹⁶⁹ They note the importance of coordinating with the GOL in providing healthcare information and services, including nutrition and sanitation especially in urban, rural, and remote areas.¹⁷⁰

4.2.4 DISABILITIES

Lao PDR faces challenges in supporting persons with disabilities as well as preventing disability. As of the 2015 Census, there are 160,881 persons with disabilities in Lao PDR, or 2.8 percent of the entire population – a likely underestimation based on WHO estimates. While the complete demographic information on these persons is unknown, such as education status, employment rate, and severity of disability, factors such as UXOs, Type 2 diabetes, stunting, and road accidents—all contribute to the prevalence of disabilities.¹⁷¹ Persons with disabilities generally struggle to receive the healthcare they

¹⁶⁵ Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁶⁶ Key stakeholder interviews; and Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2021. *The Five Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021-2025)*. (Approved by the inaugural session of the Ninth National Assembly on 22-26 March 2021 in accordance with the Resolution No. 20/NA, dated 26 March 2021).

¹⁶⁷ United Nations Lao PDR. 2021. *2020 Progress Report*.

¹⁶⁸ Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Lao Women's Union. 2021. *Strategy Plan of Lao Women Union 2021-2025*.

¹⁷¹ USAID/Laos. "USAID Okard." ([Link](#))

need. As shared by key informants, limited healthcare services, a lack of specialists, and healthcare disparities all contribute to treatment difficulties experienced by persons with disabilities.¹⁷²

The needs of persons with disabilities vary greatly, but the services offered by regional healthcare do not reflect these needs, particularly victims of UXO.¹⁷³ Highlighted by key informants, patients with psychosocial and developmental disabilities also struggle to find services in Lao PDR, with only one hospital, the Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane Capital, providing full mental healthcare, therapies, and medications.¹⁷⁴ A lack of ability to actually locate and visit services can therefore preclude proper treatment. For those with physical disabilities, this is especially a concern in conjunction with poverty, rural lack of road access, limited education, physical and mobility constraints, and personal and social barriers. Though each region may experience their own combination of these factors, altogether, they create an inhospitable health care system for persons with disabilities via compromised access to services needed.¹⁷⁵

Gender inequalities have furthered disparities in the treatment of persons with disabilities. In terms of acquiring a disability, men and boys are more likely to be affected than women and girls due to their greater likelihood of encountering UXO when traveling, farming, and foraging.¹⁷⁶ However, cultural ideologies that have informed the healthcare system can also create access issues for women with disabilities. As expressed by key informants, women with disabilities cannot attend healthcare services alone but must rely on a male to take them to treatments or visits, and if travel is involved, to safeguard them on the trip.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, the lack of privacy of treatment can be a deterrent for women with disabilities due to social concerns and stigmas. For instance, coed dormitories and open treatment areas can make female patients feel uncomfortable to the point of avoiding treatment.¹⁷⁸

To resolve these issues, the GOL should implement programs that will grant equal access to healthcare and social services, supporting the diverse regional and country-wide needs of persons with disabilities in Lao PDR. The National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021–2025) proposes to assist 5,670 of 9,607 UXO victims with medical, psychological, and rehabilitation treatments as well as vocational and employment training; their intent is to raise awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, lessening stigma and increasing support.¹⁷⁹ Additionally, Lao PDR signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons

¹⁷² Key stakeholder interviews; and Social Impact. 2018. USAID LAO PDR Gender Analysis on Disability Gender Analysis Final Report. USAID.

¹⁷³ Social Impact. 2018. USAID LAO PDR Gender Analysis on Disability Gender Analysis Final Report. USAID.

¹⁷⁴ Key stakeholder interviews; and Social Impact. 2018. USAID LAO PDR Gender Analysis on Disability Gender Analysis Final Report. USAID.

¹⁷⁵ Social Impact. 2018. USAID LAO PDR Gender Analysis on Disability Gender Analysis Final Report. USAID.

¹⁷⁶ The Asia Foundation. 2019. Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support Program. USAID.

¹⁷⁷ Key stakeholder interviews; and Social Impact. 2018. USAID LAO PDR Gender Analysis on Disability Gender Analysis Final Report. USAID.

¹⁷⁸ Social Impact. 2018. USAID LAO PDR Gender Analysis on Disability Gender Analysis Final Report. USAID.

¹⁷⁹ Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2021. The Five Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021–2025). (Approved by the inaugural session of the Ninth National Assembly on 22–26 March 2021 in accordance with the Resolution No. 20/NA, dated 26 March 2021).

with Disabilities (CRPD) and ratified the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2019, following the creation of a Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities (2021–2015) was created.

“More women take care of disabled persons than men. This limits the time women have for participation in decision making in community and economic activities in their daily life, and also leads to stress, anxiety, and depression.”

– Key Informant

Despite these advances, key informants corroborate that stigmas and stereotypes of persons with disabilities, especially women, are abundant and negatively impact livelihoods and development.¹⁸⁰ Lack of awareness of rights and limited enforcement of rights also have an impact on persons with disabilities. Moreover, discrimination prevents persons with disabilities from equitable access to education, employment, and health services.¹⁸¹ In addition, most health facilities are not accessible, especially in rural areas: they do not have ramps; assistive productive services are not available; sign language is not available. Most rehabilitation services are based at the provincial level, leaving persons with disabilities in rural areas without sufficient access to healthcare.

4.2.5 HIV/AIDS

Currently, in Lao PDR, the HIV prevalence rate overall is low at 0.3 percent, but marginally higher for men ages 15–49 (0.4 percent) than women (0.3 percent).¹⁸² However, this does represent an increase from 0.16 percent in 2003.¹⁸³ This increase may be due to a rise in cross border migration from nearby countries with higher rates of HIV.¹⁸⁴ The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates the number of adults and children living with HIV is currently 15,000.¹⁸⁵ **Only 57 percent of the estimated number of people living with HIV has been diagnosed.**¹⁸⁶ **In Lao PDR, men are disproportionately affected by HIV with 8,500 male cases versus 6,000 female cases reported in 2020.**¹⁸⁷ More women aged 15 and over living with HIV receive treatment than men (56 percent versus 53 percent).¹⁸⁸ Well over half (57 percent) of children aged 0 to 14 receive treatment.

¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁰ Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁸¹ Government of Lao People’s Democratic Republic. 2021. *The Five Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021–2025)*. (Approved by the inaugural session of the Ninth National Assembly on 22–26 March 2021 in accordance with the Resolution No. 20/NA, dated 26 March 2021).

¹⁸² UNAIDS. 2021. “Country Factsheets: Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” ([Link](#))

¹⁸³ USAID. 2019. *Laos Health Strategy (2019 – 2023)*. ([Link](#))

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ UNAIDS. 2021. “Country Factsheets: Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” ([Link](#))

¹⁸⁶ USAID. 2019. *Laos Health Strategy (2019 – 2023)*. ([Link](#))

¹⁸⁷ UNAIDS. 2021. “Country Factsheets: Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” ([Link](#))

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

Sex workers in Lao PDR have a relatively low HIV prevalence rate at 0.8 percent (male and female combined), perhaps because 90.6 percent report using a condom.¹⁹⁰ As shared by key informants, sex workers have reported that police sometimes abuse them. Transgender sex workers in particular experience violence and discrimination.¹⁹¹ The Penal Code makes it illegal to sell sex in public or private and all forms of facilitated or assisted prostitution is illegal.¹⁹² Because adultery is illegal and carries the same penalty as engaging in sex work, buying sex is technically illegal.¹⁹³

Men who have sex with men (MSM) have a HIV prevalence rate of 4.1 percent but only 35 percent report using a condom.¹⁹⁴ In Lao PDR, the number of men living with HIV is estimated to be roughly 2,000 in 2020, while this number is 189 for transgender persons and 123 for female sex workers.¹⁹⁵ Most MSM have not had rapid oral screening for HIV, are unaware of places to obtain an HIV blood test and counseling, and have never received these health services.¹⁹⁶ Homosexuality is not illegal in Lao PDR, but there is no legislation that protects people from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, same-sex marriages or civil unions are not legal, and same-sex couples are not eligible for any of the rights or benefits that are accorded heterosexual married couples.

“Peer support groups for persons with HIV/AIDS are instrumental in providing necessary information regarding testing, treatment, and psycho-social support. Expand peer support groups to encourage community support.”

— Key Informant

As corroborated by key informants, transgender persons face the greatest barriers in accessing effective HIV services.¹⁹⁸ This is due to many factors, including stigmatization from health service providers because of their physical appearance and gender expression, the economic vulnerability of many transgender persons caused by limited access to careers due to discrimination, and forced or voluntary participation in formal and informal sex work.¹⁹⁹ Transgender women, bisexual people, and gay men get tested for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STI) more than transgender men and lesbians. This might be because healthcare

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Key stakeholder interviews; and The Institute of Development Studies. “Sexuality, Poverty, and Law Program: Lao PDR.” ([Link](#))

¹⁹² The Institute of Development Studies. “Sexuality, Poverty, and Law Program: Lao PDR.” ([Link](#))

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ UNAIDS. 2021. “Country Factsheets: Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” ([Link](#))

¹⁹⁵ Johnston, Lisa G., Phothong Siliphong, and Keopphet Phoumphone. 2020. *Integrated Biological-Behavioral Surveillance Survey Among Female Sex Workers and Men Who Have Sex with Men in Lao PDR*. National Ethic Committee for Health Research, Ministry of Health, Centre for HIV/AIDS and STI, Global Fund to the Ministry of Health, World Health Organization, and UNAIDS.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ APCOM and the Community Health and Inclusion Association (CHias). 2020. *The State of LGBTQI People’s Economic Inclusion: Lao PDR*. ([Link](#))

¹⁹⁸ Key stakeholder interviews.

¹⁹⁹ Key stakeholder interviews; and APCOM and the Community Health and Inclusion Association (CHias). 2020. *The State of LGBTQI People’s Economic Inclusion: Lao PDR*. ([Link](#))

services for LGBTQI+ patients do not include transgender men and lesbians HIV/STI services.²⁰⁰ Key informants expressed the importance of supporting networks for persons with HIV/AIDS.²⁰¹ There are some peer support networks in urban areas but there is a need to expand support to share information regarding testing and treatment, and to offer psycho-social support and peer advocacy. These peer support groups can be in person and through virtual platforms have been found successful in making these connections and establishing trustful relationships in addressing the needs of persons with HIV/AIDS and LGBTQI+ persons.

4.2.6 MALARIA

Malaria is a major health concern for Lao PDR with a high rate of transmission in remote and forest areas, especially in the southern provinces (more than 95 percent of all malaria cases).²⁰² Ninety percent of those affected are young adult males,²⁰³ as shared by key informants, this is due to the work of men in the forest in the southern regions.²⁰⁴ There are no official sex-disaggregated data on malaria prevalence rates currently. Among households with mosquito nets, the percentage of households with at least one net for every two persons is highest in the south region (77.4 percent), followed by the north region (67 percent) and the central region (66.2 percent). Only about half of households in the poorest wealth quintile (52.6 percent) have mosquito nets for every two persons, although nearly all have at least one mosquito net (95 percent).²⁰⁵

Between 2000 and 2010, Lao PDR had significant progress during which malaria cases were reduced by 92 percent.²⁰⁶ However, from 2011 to 2014 a major outbreak occurred whereby over 50,000 malaria cases were recorded in 2014 alone.²⁰⁷ This three-year outbreak was a turning point for the country's malaria strategy and revealed weaknesses in the Lao PDR's data management systems. These weaknesses are partly related to the difficulty of designing malaria interventions that are effective in Lao PDR's ethnically and geographically diverse environment. For example, often high-risk malaria areas host a broad range of ethnic minorities, and neighboring communities sometimes display very different trends of malaria transmission.²⁰⁸ There is a need to spread awareness about how malaria is transmitted and can be prevented as well as information about where to access malaria tests. This should be targeted at those populations most at risk, especially young adult males working in forested areas who are most affected.

²⁰⁰ APCOM and the Community Health and Inclusion Association (CHias). 2020. *The State of LGBTQI People's Economic Inclusion: Lao PDR*. ([Link](#))

²⁰¹ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁰² Vilay, Phoutnalong, Daisuke Nonaka, Phosadeth Senamonty, Malayvanh Lao, Moritoshi Iwagami, Jun Kobayashi, Paul Michael Hernandez, et al. 2019. "Malaria Prevalence, Knowledge, Perception, Preventive and Treatment Behavior Among Military in Champasak and Attapeu Provinces, Lao PDR: a Mixed Methods Study." *Trop Med Health*: 47(11). ([Link](#)); and USAID. 2019. *Laos Health Strategy (2019 – 2023)*. ([Link](#))

²⁰³ USAID. 2019. *Laos Health Strategy (2019 – 2023)*. ([Link](#))

²⁰⁴ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁰⁵ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistics Bureau, and UNICEF.

²⁰⁶ World Health Organization. 2021. "Towards Zero: Harnessing Data to Eliminate Malaria in The Lao People's Democratic Republic." ([Link](#))

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Key informants stress that there is a great need to transmit information from the central level to village level, and there are weaknesses in capturing data at the local level.²⁰⁹ Women/mothers could be instrumental in influencing behavior, disseminating information, and collecting data, with support from healthcare providers.

The GOL has committed to the elimination of malaria by 2030.²¹⁰ However, the emergence and spread of multi-drug resistant malaria throughout the region, coupled with a highly mobile population that lack adequate access to malaria health services, pose significant challenges for malaria elimination in Lao PDR by 2030.²¹¹ The Greater Mekong Sub-region has historically been considered the epicenter for the development and spread of drug resistant malaria, which, if it was to spread to Africa, would undermine global progress toward eliminating malaria.²¹²

4.2.7 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

For Lao PDR, the largest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the availability of health resources. Not only has COVID-19 strained the health care sector in terms of its capacity to provide services to citizens, but the social distancing and essential service restrictions have kept many men, women, and children from accessing health services and related benefits. Comprehensive healthcare is provided in Lao PDR through outreach services, but these community-based services were compromised during quarantine restrictions, leaving women and children in remote areas without consistent healthcare. This is exacerbated by the fact COVID-19 has affected women in Lao PDR disproportionately, as they comprise 65 percent of frontline workers.²¹³ As shared by key informants, these factors suggest negative effects for women and children in Lao, including reduced access to nutritional assistance, prenatal health monitoring, skilled birth attendants, and health services.²¹⁴

The stresses and strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have also likely negatively impacted mental health, with potential implications to increase counseling and psychosocial support services. Social Impact's COVID-19 Assessment notes that psychological challenges are expected to increase among the most vulnerable – ethnic minorities, the poor, migrants, persons with disabilities, and rural households.²¹⁵ **A UNICEF report on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents' wellbeing and mental health highlights how the emotional impact of the pandemic and lockdown are likely to be far greater on them given that adolescence is time for developing social skills, empathy, and a sense of identity through interactions with peers – all of which have been curtailed by social distancing and the lockdown.**²¹⁶ The report stresses that young people whose education or work is disrupted are almost twice as likely to have anxiety or depression as those who did not experience such disruptions, underscoring the interlinkages between mental well-being, educational success, and labor market integration. It also notes that short-term loneliness may

²⁰⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

²¹⁰ UNOPS. n.d. "Towards a Malaria-Free Laos." ([Link](#))

²¹¹ USAID. 2019. *Laos Health Strategy (2019 – 2023)*. ([Link](#))

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*. USAID.

²¹⁴ Key stakeholder interviews; and Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*. USAID.

²¹⁵ Social Impact. 2021. *Final Report: USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*.

²¹⁶ UNICEF. *Impact of COVID-19: Adolescent Wellbeing and Mental Health*.

encourage adolescents to engage in risky behavior and resort to substance abuse. Moreover, a rapid needs assessment by the NGO Humanity and Inclusion that focuses on the perspectives of persons with disabilities found that 58 percent of respondents have felt “hopelessness/nervousness/anxiety/sleeping difficulty/physical reactions” due to the pandemic and lockdowns, and 83 percent expressed the need for mental health and psychosocial support services to be able to cope with those feelings.²¹⁷

Additional barriers to healthcare include linguistic and digital access issues for those seeking online health information. Many citizens cannot read Lao proficiently, impacting their abilities to access the necessary information to understand and prevent COVID-19. In addition, the Mon-Khmer, Hmong Mien, and Sino-Tibetan people have limited mobile phone, internet, and computer access in contrast with other Lao-Tai people.²¹⁸ As noted and shared by key informants, other barriers include women and girls feeling uncomfortable visiting health care facilities as there are insufficiently private areas for consultations and a majority of male doctors.²¹⁹ Women and girls also often require accompaniment by males to the health centers who are often working and therefore not available to accompany them. Health facilities also are far away, and transportation is not readily available.

As the healthcare system and workers continue to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other health concerns in Lao PDR, interventions should examine opportunities for integrating women’s empowerment, including women’s economic empowerment opportunities. A growing body of evidence suggests that increasing the share of household income controlled by women has beneficial effects on nutrition, family planning, maternal mortality, and child mortality, and can also lead to increased investment in children’s education, delayed marriage, and reductions in GBV.²²⁰

4.3 ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

Below are 2021 U.S. Government [standard foreign assistance \(F\) indicators](#) that USAID/Laos may consider for use in monitoring, evaluation, and learning in this sector.

TABLE 5. EDUCATION: KEY ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS BY KEY ISSUE

KEY ISSUE	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
GBV Prevention and Response	<p>GNDR-6 Number of people reached by a USG-funded intervention providing GBV services (e.g., health, legal, psycho-social counseling, shelters, hotlines)</p> <p>Number of persons who can articulate where to turn if they or someone they know has experienced GBV</p>

²¹⁷ Humanity and Inclusion. 2020. *Rapid Need Assessment – Views from Persons with Disabilities, Leaving No One Behind in Response to COVID-19 Lao PDR*. Briefing Paper.

²¹⁸ Ministry of Planning and Investment. 2021. *COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR*.

²¹⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

²²⁰ The Gates Foundation conducted a systematic review of 323 impact evaluations to examine the causal links between health and interventions that promote WEE, showing a strong positive effect on nutrition, but mixed results on family planning and limited effects on morbidity and health-seeking behavior. However, a review of 14,410 studies investigating WEE and health outcomes in India (with 184 particularly relevant studies reviewed in detail) found strong positive associational links between improved health outcomes (in child mortality, nutrition, and family planning) and WEE. ([Link](#))

Health Systems	GNDR-8 Number of persons trained with USG assistance to advance outcomes consistent with gender equality or female empowerment through their roles in public or private sector institutions or organizations CUSTOM Percentage increase in female VHWs
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5 ECONOMIC GROWTH: FINDINGS, EVIDENCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TABLE 6. ECONOMIC GROWTH: SNAPSHOT OF RELEVANT STATISTICS

- The World Bank’s 2020 Doing Business Report ranks Lao PDR at 154 (out of 190 countries), with a 50.8 score (out of 100).²²¹
- Lao PDR is ranked 113 (out of 141) in the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index.²²²
- More women than men open businesses out of necessity because they need a source of income (31 percent of women, 15 percent of men) or were unable to find another source of income (65 percent of women, 34 percent of men).²²³
- In 2018, 60.2 percent of individuals who ran household businesses were female (39.8 percent for males), a significant increase from 2013 data (49.4 percent women, 50.5 percent men).²²⁴
- In 2018, 52 percent of female-owned firms were micro-sized (8 percent for male-owned firms), 45 percent were small (57 percent for male-owned firms), and 3 percent were medium (30 percent for male-owned firms).²²⁵
- 79 percent of male respondents perceived little variation in the interpretation of regulations and compliance requirements, compared with 56 percent of female respondents.²²⁶
- 91 percent of men agreed regulations are enforced consistently across businesses, compared with 64 percent of women.²²⁷

5.1 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings and recommendations are presented below by subsector, in order of priority, based on issues identified by key informants and stakeholders and in key reports from the literature review.

5.1.1 SUPPORT FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

Business development services are not providing targeted support for smaller enterprises, especially among women-owned businesses and outside of urban areas. Instead, these services cater to the business development needs of formal, urban-based, medium-sized enterprises, which tend to be owned and operated by men. This means that many potential business development and expansion needs go unmet, especially among women-owned businesses, which tend to be smaller, and businesses established at the provincial and district levels.

²²¹ World Bank. 2020. *Ease of Doing Business in Lao PDR: Country Profile*. ([Link](#))

²²² World Economic Forum. 2019. *Global Competitiveness Report 2019: How to End a Lost Decade of Productivity Growth*.

²²³ GOL. 2021. *Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR*. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

²²⁴ GOL. 2019. *Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 6*. Lao Statistics Bureau, Vientiane.

²²⁵ GOL. 2021. *Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR*. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

- Expand business development services to provincial and district levels; support “right-sized” services and capacity building that are responsive to the needs of smaller enterprises.
- Support literacy, numeracy, and Internet know-how to increase business development and expansion, targeting women entrepreneurs in rural areas.
- Support the development of self-paced online business development learning platforms with targeted tools to support smaller business, including ICT tools, marketing, information on how to write a business plan, and other lessons for aspiring business owners.

Most women’s business association members own medium-sized formal enterprises. Women own or run about a third of the MSMEs in Lao PDR—with most being microenterprises. Targeting association membership only to larger business enterprises precludes networking and mentoring opportunities among women business owners and prospective new entrants into the business world.

- Strengthen or establish women’s business associations targeting sectors with significant women’s economic participation (i.e., handicrafts and tourism), especially at the provincial and district levels.
- Support networking opportunities and mentoring programs within women’s business associations that connect successful women business owners with aspiring women entrepreneurs.

5.1.2 WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

More women than men become entrepreneurs (or work as traders) out of necessity, because they need both a source of income and flexibility to accommodate care responsibilities. Women’s time and labor constraints and lack of collateral also inhibit access to capital, business development and expansion, and entrepreneurial innovation and risk taking.

- Support interventions that recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work and reduce women’s time poverty and that increase their employment or self-employment choices and economic agency.
- Integrate household-based methodologies to facilitate dialogue, critical reflection, and goal setting to improve cooperation between partners and more equitable workloads in both reproductive and productive activities, including MSMEs.
- Support gender-responsive business development services that improve women’s financial literacy, access to capital, and business acumen while increasing self-confidence and personal initiative.

5.1.3 INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH

“The Government wants all to be treated equally, but the Hmong villages are less empowered, have less technology, have less services, and are less productive because they have experienced more discrimination in the past.”

– Key Informant

Inclusive economic growth is hindered by low job growth and limited opportunities to expand local enterprises and launch startups. Access to capital is limited by a lack of

collateral for loans to start or expand business and by low levels of financial literacy. More investment is needed in human resources and startup capital to accelerate innovation, confidence in business risk taking, and entrepreneurship, especially for youth of all genders.

- Support social enterprise organizations and business associations that work with youth empowerment and entrepreneurship. Examples are Sisterhood (working to empower young Hmong women with skills coaching and handicraft production) and STELLA (supporting young women in overcoming barriers to entrepreneurship).
- Support intensive/weekend startup “challenge” accelerator events at the provincial level that crowdsource funding, provide technical support (business and marketing plans), and create networking opportunities for aspiring young entrepreneurs.
- Expand training in financial literacy to include household budgeting and expenses, product pricing and sales to maximize profits, and optimal allocations of time and labor among family members, examined through a gender lens.

Agricultural production is shifting from subsistence farming to market-oriented and diversified production, although a substantial share of farmers continue to produce at a subsistence level. This agrarian transition is difficult for farmers who are unable to adapt production, especially in places which lack infrastructure as well as for upland farmers with poor quality soils. Supply chains and quality control are weak, and there are limited agro-input services to assist with difficult choices about what to grow and when and how to use pesticides on crops, in light of poor soil quality and time poverty. Moreover, women’s labor supply is virtually exhausted.

- Support access to new market opportunities such as the opportunities created by the Lao-China rail line and organic agriculture, especially for youth entrepreneurs and women traders and business owners.
- Support mobile agro-input supplier enterprises, including focusing on needs of women farmers.
- Subsidize appropriate technologies and female-friendly labor-saving devices to reduce time poverty.
- Connect family-run farms with social enterprises such as DakDae, working with women and youth to improve production, quality control, marketing, and value-addition (i.e., packaging and branding).
- Integrate a household methodology into project activities, such as GALS (Gender Action Learning System), to support shifts in social norms and to nudge changes in labor allocation that benefit families and increase incomes, including task-shifting and shared responsibilities in the care economy.

Tourism and agriculture are the sectors with the most potential for inclusive jobs growth in rural and remote areas. Increased agricultural productivity can have up to three times the poverty-reducing effect of nonagricultural growth, and tourism provides business opportunities and creates jobs that are more easily obtainable for the poor and less-skilled in rural areas.

- Support agricultural production (especially organic) and short-distance value chains for niche products to be marketed and supplied to tourist destinations.
- Support scholarships for formal education particularly for women and girls, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities; support updating education curricula and vocational training to improve skills needed for the tourism sector, including English language fluency, ICTs, e-marketing, and soft skills (reliability, communication, and negotiation).
- Investigate the potential for establishing a national fair-trade handicrafts association that certifies fair trade production, ensuring fair remuneration for producers and quality standards for handicrafts.

Ecotourism in Lao PDR is growing; links between tourism and agriculture could be used to promote agritourism, which is an increasingly popular trend in other countries.

- Support scholarships and local training on ecotourism and agritourism (including “dos and don’ts”), especially for ethnic minority communities, focusing on basic literacy, numeracy, and food safety and sanitization.
- Increase awareness in communities with ecotourism demand (or potential) about guidelines for ecotourism, agritourism, and homestay that have been recently established in other countries.
- Increase public awareness of ecotourism travel opportunities through information centers.
- Support tourism and hospitality vocational courses at the provincial level, focusing on in-demand digital skills for e-commerce and marketing.

Migrant labor and remittances are “safety valves” for youth (of any gender) who lack other opportunities, and migrant outflows are likely to surpass even previous peaks as COVID-19 enters an endemic stage.

- Support information campaigns on the legal rights of migrants to enable safe migration both within Lao PDR and abroad, partnering with NPAs/CSOs who work with vulnerable groups, including ethnic minority women from rural areas and LGBTQI individuals who tend to be most at risk of being trafficked.
- Enhance support for tourism, agriculture, and handicrafts production, which provide the potential for job growth especially among the poor, women, and minority ethnic groups in rural and remote areas.

5.2 DATA AND EVIDENCE

Lao PDR has had strong economic growth since economic reforms in the late 1980s, largely driven by the natural resource sector. Between 2010 and 2019, hydropower and mining accounted for 20 percent of total GDP and represented around 65 percent of the foreign direct investment (FDI), but this

resource-based growth has not generated sufficient job creation.²²⁸ With few jobs being created in non-resource sectors, a large proportion of the workforce remains engaged in agriculture and the informal sector. The 9th NSEDP aims to address economic constraints due to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the needs of those left furthest behind, through changes in virtually every area of the economy: the macro-fiscal framework and financing for development; trade and private sector; value chains and tourism; human capital; labor markets and migration; and green growth, resilience, and risk management.²²⁹

This section identifies key areas for gender inclusion in economic growth, drawing on gender-related opportunities and constraints as highlighted both by key informants and stakeholders and in the literature review and SOW. Data and evidence are presented in the following subsections: employment and self-employment (including labor force participation, informal sector, and migration); women's economic empowerment; business enabling environment (including transparency, regulatory certainty, and regional trade); small and medium enterprises support; inclusive sectors (agriculture and tourism); entrepreneurship and innovation; and the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2.1 EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Lao PDR's "jobless growth" started to slow in the early 2010s, with GDP growth declining from 8 percent in 2013 to 6.3 percent in 2018.²³⁰ Key factors associated with this jobless growth are deteriorating private sector conditions and skills and spatial mismatches in employment.²³¹ **In a 2021 report on youth unemployment, both youth and employers identified a lack in three main skills: English language fluency, computer literacy, and communication skills.**²³² In addition, respondents from educational institutions confirmed that the skills most instrumental in securing employment are not taught systematically in schools. This situation is starker for youth and women from non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, who face significant barriers to literacy and education, including higher rates of poverty, lower rates of school completion and adult literacy, lack of infrastructure in remote areas, gender bias, and the mandate to learn in Lao language.²³³

The ratio of working-age population (aged 15 to 64) to non-working-age population has risen from 1.1 in 1993 to 1.7. Surplus labor in a growing economy typically sparks a shift from traditional agriculture and informal sectors toward the industrial, service, and formal sectors. However, in Lao PDR, this shift has been obstructed by the lack of employment creation, with the employment-to-population ratio falling from 81.9 percent in 2012 to 60.8 percent in 2018.²³⁴

²²⁸ Even as the mining and hydropower sectors reached 20.7 percent of GDP in 2018–19, they contributed less than one percent of total employment. World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR: Building an Economy That Works Again*. Washington, D.C.

²²⁹ UN. 2021. *2020 Progress Report Lao PDR-United Nations Partnership Framework 2017-2021: A Partnership for Sustainable Development*. Vientiane.

²³⁰ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR: Building an Economy That Works Again*. Washington, D.C.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² UNDP. 2021. *Youth Unemployment Issues in Lao PDR Report*. UNDP and Vientiane. ([Link](#))

²³³ USAID. 2019. *USAID Learn to Read Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis Report*. Save the Children.

²³⁴ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR: Building an Economy That Works Again*. Washington, D.C.

Jobs are central to inclusive growth. In Lao PDR, firms with higher growth and potential for job creation tend to be young (less than 10 years), medium-sized (with more than 20 employees), and operate in the construction, manufacturing, and hospitality sectors.²³⁵ However, **high-growth firms report that their opportunities for business expansion are constrained by tax rates, skills shortages, and inadequate transport infrastructure.**²³⁶

These constraints are echoed in a 2017 ADB report on accelerating structural transformation. This report identifies the following long-term challenges for inclusive growth in Lao PDR: 1) low productive capacity, with highly concentrated production and export structure; 2) weak governance and inefficient public management; 3) low levels of human capital and quality of education; 4) inadequate and poor infrastructure; and 5) limited public services.²³⁷ It recommends diversifying exports and transitioning the economy from low-productivity to high-productivity activities to promote decent job opportunities and reduce regional inequalities. Key informants note that Lao PDR will also need to expand investments in skills and capacity-building to create productive employment and rewarding jobs.²³⁸

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION. Labor force participation fell from 84.6 percent to 72.1 percent between 2012 and 2018.²³⁹ The decline was more pronounced for women (from 78.9 percent to 66.2 percent), young people (77.5 percent to 57.8 percent) and adults aged 60 and over (88.5 percent to 76.9 percent).²⁴⁰ A higher proportion of women remained out of the paid labor force to take on unpaid housework and childcare responsibilities; young people pursued higher education and stayed longer in school; and over-60-year-old adults were more likely to retire. This pre-COVID reduction in the workforce suggests that unemployment rates understate the share of out-of-work population.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, youth (aged 15 to 24) were unemployed at twice the national unemployment rate (18.2 percent versus 9.4 percent).²⁴¹ **By 2030, the working age population will increase by 33 percent.**²⁴² This demographic dividend could propel economic growth; however, there are concerns that the country will face challenges absorbing this burgeoning group of youth into the workforce, given low levels of educational attainment and skills training.²⁴³

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ ADB. 2017. *Lao PDR Accelerating Structural Transformation for Inclusive Growth: Country Diagnostics Study*. Manila.

²³⁸ Key stakeholder interviews.

²³⁹ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR: Building an Economy That Works Again*. Washington, D.C.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ The 2017 Labor Force Survey adopted new conceptions of work, employment, and labor underutilization in alignment with the 2013 International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS). The key difference from the previous definition is that those who worked solely or mainly for their own use or consumption are no longer considered to be in employment. Around 2 million people are estimated to be unemployed, because they engage in own-use production, do not work for pay or profit, and are not actively searching and/or available for work. GOL 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

²⁴² UNDP. 2016. *Shaping the Future: How Changing Demographics Can Power Human Development*. Asia-Pacific Human Development Report. New York, NY.

²⁴³ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.

INFORMAL SECTOR. Lao PDR's business climate provides an enabling environment for informality.²⁴⁴ The GOL's 2018 Labor Force Survey calculates that there are more people employed in the informal sector (35.2 percent) and as household/contributing family workers (38.3 percent) than in the formal sector (26.5 percent).^{245, 246} The highest informal employment rates are in Huaphanh province (94.2 percent) and Luang Prabang province (93.4 percent). The lowest rates are in Sekong province (68.0 percent) and Savannakhet province (69.1 percent). **Overall, women are more likely to be in informal employment than men (85.9 percent versus 79.9 percent), except in Luang Prabang province and urban areas.** In urban areas, women's engagement in informal employment is less than men's (70.7 percent versus 88.8 percent).

Women-owned enterprises predominate in the informal sector, with women involved in running small and often informal family businesses. **According to the 2019 Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey Report, 60.2 percent of individuals who run household businesses are female (and 39.8 percent are male).**²⁴⁷ This is a significant increase from the 2013 Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey, which indicated an almost even split (49.4 percent female versus 50.5 percent male). Lack of education, few formal employment opportunities, gender norms, and limited access to childcare and resources are key drivers of women opting to establish informal enterprises.

A 2021 UNDP and UNICEF report examines gender barriers to entrepreneurship among girls and young women in Southeast Asia, including Lao PDR.²⁴⁸ In the report, women ages 20–24 explained that pressure to be “in proximity to home and family” restricted professional choices, limiting their options to “what is around them, such as agricultural work or informal home-based entrepreneurship.” **These young women and girls, who live in both urban and rural areas, identified self-employment (selling goods) as their only realistic option, due a lack of employment opportunities.** Young women and girls also expressed concern about putting financial burdens on their families by acquiring higher education, noting that they have seen women with higher education return to the village because they were unable to secure gainful employment. This observation was corroborated by key informants.²⁴⁹ However, key informants also stressed that continued investment in education will be central to bringing families out of poverty and increasing opportunities for both employment and self-employment.²⁵⁰ As one key informant said: “Young women need to build their voices and experience through schooling and capacity-building—and quality education that makes schooling worth completing.”²⁵¹

Women also struggle with gender norms that prescribe household and care economy roles and responsibilities almost entirely to women. Even educated women often drop out of the workforce after

²⁴⁴ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR: Building an Economy That Works Again*. Washington, D.C.

²⁴⁵ Contributing family workers are defined as: “A person who works in his/her family business without receiving any regular pay.” GOL. 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

²⁴⁶ GOL. 2018. *Lao Labor Force Survey 2017*. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

²⁴⁷ GOL. 2019. *Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 6*. Lao Statistics Bureau, Vientiane.

²⁴⁸ UNDP and UNICEF. 2021. *Addressing Gender Barriers to Entrepreneurship Among Girls and Young Women in South-East Asia*. Bangkok: UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub and UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office.

²⁴⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Key stakeholder interview.

having children, because of the lack of men's involvement in childcare and other unpaid care work. This underscores the need for expanding childcare facilities, offering flexible workplaces and schedules, and promoting male engagement to realize the benefits of cooperation and shared labor in reproductive and economic activities.

MIGRATION. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (mid-2019), 1.3 million people in Lao PDR had migrated overseas for employment, the majority of whom (56 percent) were female.²⁵² Migration to ASEAN countries accounts for the bulk of this move, amounting to 0.95 million (0.42 million males and 0.53 million females); note that the data likely far understates the actual numbers, as this does not include undocumented migrants.²⁵³ Factors influencing decisions to migrate to other countries include low wages in Lao PDR, the strains placed by rural-urban migration on the job market, and the growing demand for low- and medium-skilled workers in Thailand to fill gaps in the labor market there.²⁵⁴ A key informant described external migration as a “safety valve” for employment, given the few opportunities in Lao PDR.²⁵⁵ Most migrants have since returned because of the pandemic, which has led to a reported uptick in the availability of agricultural labor.

Internal migration is also common within Lao PDR. According to the 2016 Population and Housing Census, approximately 17 percent of the population do not live in their district of birth.²⁵⁶ Well over half (59.2 percent) of internal migrants are female.²⁵⁷ Vientiane Capital attracts the most migrants, with four out of 10 people in the city reported to originally come from other parts of the country.²⁵⁸ Most internal migrants move for employment, business opportunities, or workplace transfers (28 percent), followed by family reasons (18.3 percent), access to educational facilities (14.9 percent), and marriage (10 percent).²⁵⁹

Within a migration context, vulnerability is reflected in a limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with or recover from harm.²⁶⁰ Many migrant workers are more vulnerable to exploitative conditions, including underpayment, unsafe workplaces, debt bondage, and human trafficking, and they work in jobs that are among the least protected and lowest paid.²⁶¹ Poor working conditions are exacerbated for female migrant workers who tend to be employed in occupations that remain outside legal protection mechanisms, such as domestic workers in private households.²⁶² Female migrants are generally less

²⁵² Based on data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Cited in IOM. 2021. *Assessing Potential Changes in Lao Migration Trends and Patterns*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

²⁵³ ILO. 2021. TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note (October to December 2021).

²⁵⁴ IOM. 2021. *Assessing Potential Changes in Lao Migration Trends and Patterns*. Vientiane, Lao PDR. ([Link](#))

²⁵⁵ Key stakeholder interview.

²⁵⁶ GOL. 2016. Population and Housing Census. Lao Statistics Bureau. Cited in IOM. 2021. *Assessing Potential Changes in Lao Migration Trends and Patterns*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

²⁵⁷ GOL. 2016. *Population and Housing Census*. Lao Statistics Bureau.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ IOM. 2021. *Assessing Potential Changes in Lao Migration Trends and Patterns*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

²⁶¹ ILO. 2021. TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note (October to December 2021).

²⁶² Ibid.

educated and younger than male migrants, which puts them at greater risk of labor and sexual exploitation.²⁶³

“Once the COVID fear is over, the migration boom is going to explode... Countries are waiting for remittances to come, but not seriously thinking about how to manage safe migration and translate the migration dream into a reality.”

-Key Informant

As the pandemic shifts into an endemic phase, and given increases in poverty rates, it is likely that both external and internal migration will surge and perhaps surpass pre-pandemic levels. Key informants stressed that this underscores the need for expanding access to information about safe migration, by increasing awareness about labor policies and risks of trafficking both within Lao PDR and other countries.²⁶⁴ The IOM has been in Lao PDR since 2001 and recently launched its first-ever country strategy (2022-2026). The strategy outlines continued collaboration with GOL line ministries to support immigration and border management, labor migration and human development, migration health, migration protection and assistance, and migration, environment, and climate change initiatives. Key informants highlight a lack of coordination among key line ministries as well as a need for conceptual clarity, with migration and trafficking often conflated.²⁶⁵ They also note that while migrant resource centers are meant to assist individuals planning to work abroad, the services provided are very basic. Hotlines set up to support migrants in trouble do not provide 24-hour response services, and calls go unanswered. Moreover, these services tend to be staffed by individuals who lack legal knowledge and counseling training.²⁶⁶ The IOM is working with key line ministries to prepare a roadmap to support improved implementation and coordination among key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

5.2.2 WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Women-owned firms are primarily micro and small enterprises, both formal and informal. Lao PDR Enterprise Survey results show that 52 percent of female-owned firms were micro-sized (compared to 8 percent of male-owned firms), 45 percent were small (compared to 57 percent of male-owned firms), and 3 percent were medium (compared to 30 percent of male-owned firms).²⁶⁷ Among large firms, there was no representation of female ownership. The main sectors with formalized women-owned firms are retail (56 percent); hotels and restaurants (24 percent); wholesale (8 percent); food (4 percent); and construction (3 percent). Among men-owned formalized firms, the main sectors are hotels and restaurants (22 percent); wholesale (17 percent); retail (15 percent); construction (10 percent); and food (9 percent). Male-owned informal businesses focus on manufacturing household items (35 percent), motor vehicle repairs (19 percent), reselling of food or groceries (11 percent), selling other goods (6 percent), and other manufacturing (5 percent). By contrast, women-owned

²⁶³ UN. 2015. Country Analysis Report: Lao PDR. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

²⁶⁴ Key stakeholder interview.

²⁶⁵ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ For the purposes of this study, firm sizes were defined based on the number of employees as follows: small (5-19), medium (20-99), and large (100+). GOL. 2021. *Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR*. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

informal businesses are concentrated in the reselling of food or groceries (77 percent), with much smaller percentages in manufacturing of clothes or shoes (5 percent), hairdressers or barber shops (4 percent), manufacturing of handicrafts (3 percent), and selling of other goods (3 percent).²⁶⁸

The reasons for starting a business differ for men and women. Substantially more women than men open a business out of necessity—because they needed a source of income (31 percent of women, 15 percent of men) or were unable to find another source of income (65 percent of women, 34 percent of men).²⁶⁹ There is also evidence of sectoral and occupational segmentation in male and female preferences for business activities, suggesting that women are facing “glass walls” as well as “glass ceiling” in employment and in management and leadership positions.²⁷⁰ Constraints to women’s economic empowerment are correlated with gender norms about the acceptability of work in specific sectors and activities as well as care responsibilities. Key informants highlight that the burdens of unpaid care limit women’s economic and employment options and opportunities.²⁷¹ Recent infrastructure developments have improved roads and increased access to water, electricity, and preschools, and higher cash incomes have enabled households to buy labor saving devices, such as water pumps, refrigerators, washing machines, and rice cookers. This has reduced total hours spent on domestic tasks. However, **the gender gap in the time devoted to unpaid domestic and care work remains significant, with women spending five times as much time as men.**²⁷² Moreover, there are regional and ethnic differences in gender norms regarding household and care economy roles and responsibilities as well as public interaction (e.g., participation in meetings or trainings). For example, Hmong tend to follow a stricter gender division of labor, with women rarely being allowed to interact with men in activities such as public meetings or consultations and sharing meals.

“When people speak of gender equality, the impression is that women need to do more, but women are already doing too much.”

— Key Informant

Nevertheless, there is evidence that normative shifts are happening. Surveys conducted by the Lao Microenterprise Project, a USAID/Laos implementing partner, indicate that some men are doing household and agricultural tasks traditionally done by women.²⁷³ In Phase One, this project offered training for farmers focusing on household budgeting and expenses, product pricing and sales to maximize profits, and the allocation of time and labor of family members, with gender integrated throughout. In discussing who was doing what (and for how long), emphasis was placed on the economic bottom line of “how to make the family better off.” This led participants to the realization that if men assumed more household responsibilities, then women would have more time to produce weavings,

²⁶⁸ Based on calculations drawn from the Lao Enterprise Survey (2018) and Lao Informal Enterprise Survey (2019), as cited in GOL. 2021. *Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR*. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

²⁶⁹ GOL. 2021. *Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR*. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁷² ADB. 2020. *Exploring the Gender Dimensions of Unpaid Care Work in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*. ADB Briefs, No. 163.

²⁷³ Key informant interview, 30 November 2021.

tapestries, or other handicrafts, which are an important income source for families. Before and after surveys revealed that more than half of respondents believe that men started to do more household chores, following this exposure to differences in time allocation and use between men and women.

More attention needs to be given (both in design and implementation) to strategies and approaches that can influence normative shifts toward increased cooperation and shared childcare and household responsibilities. Women shoulder the majority of unpaid care economy work, with significant impacts on women's employment or self-employment choices and economic agency. Household methodologies have been proven effective at facilitating dialogue, critical reflection, and goal setting, leading to more equitable workloads and economic opportunities. In addition, gender-responsive business development services that improve women's financial literacy and business acumen while encouraging their self-confidence and personal initiative have also been shown to increase women's economic empowerment and personal agency.

5.2.3 BUSINESS ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

According to the 2020 World Bank Doing Business report, Lao PDR ranks at 154 overall (out of 190 countries), with a score of 50.8 (out of 100).²⁷⁴ The World Bank's 2016 Enterprise Survey notes that the main constraints to doing business, as identified by firms, are informal sector practices (40 percent) followed by tax rates (33 percent) and transportation (23 percent). Similarly, the 2018 World Bank Doing Business Report identifies transportation as the highest concern for exporters (34 percent), followed by trade regulations (23 percent).²⁷⁵ Women-owned firms have different concerns. Only 17 percent of women-owned firms stated that transportation was a serious problem (compared to 28 percent of firms with male owners). Moreover, 40 percent of female-owned firms said that tax rates were a serious issue, compared to 32 percent of male-owned firms; 23 percent of women-owned firms reported that access to land was a constraint, compared to only 16 percent for male-owned firms.

TRANSPARENCY AND REGULATORY CERTAINTY. Registered firms that adopt formal practices incur higher costs and feel targeted by authorities; they resent that unregistered or rule-evading competitors can avoid scrutiny due to the difficulty of enforcement and/or the prevalence of petty corruption.²⁷⁶ This has a negative effect on formal employment and high-quality jobs by increasing economic pressures and price points on formal firms that may have closed, downsized, reduced profit margins, or established themselves in the informal economy to stay solvent.²⁷⁷

Poor regulatory compliance by informal firms, combined with inconsistent enforcement by the authorities, disadvantages formal firms, especially small and medium-sized firms which are more likely to be competing with informal enterprises. The World Bank identifies four main types of “problematic informality” in Lao PDR's business environment: inadequately registered enterprises; widespread tax evasion; irregular adherence to complex and burdensome regulations; and a culture of non-compliance

²⁷⁴ World Bank. 2020. “Ease of Doing Business in Lao PDR: Country Profile.” ([Link](#))

²⁷⁵ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR: Building an Economy That Works Again*. Washington, D.C.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

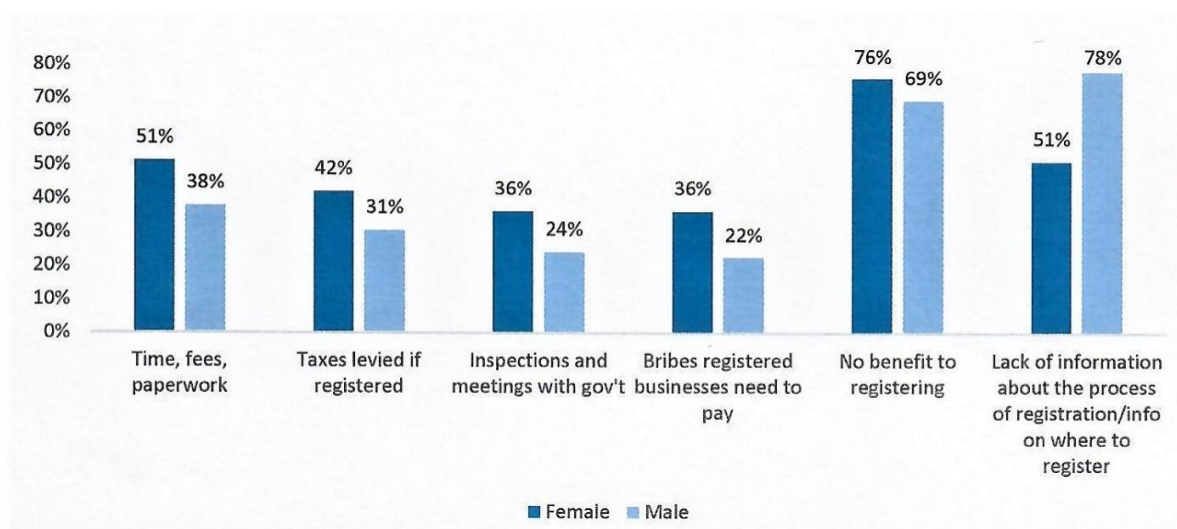
²⁷⁷ Ibid.

with basic rules and standards.²⁷⁸ This is corroborated by key informants who state that competition from the informal sector undermines economic competitiveness and the viability of formal enterprises.²⁷⁹

Based on data from informal firms collected through the Lao Informal Enterprise Survey (2019), business registration among women-owned firms is reportedly constrained by lack of awareness of registration benefits, lack of information about the process (where and how to register), and concerns related to time, costs/fees, and paperwork (Figure 3).²⁸⁰

Women view transaction costs (lost time, fees, and paperwork) as a much greater concern than men (51 percent versus 38 percent). This likely reflects women's differential access to information and networks that would help them navigate registration and their smaller net profits and income, as well as greater workloads and time poverty due to unequal care burdens.

Figure 3. Main reasons for not registering firms, by sex



Adapted from: GOL. 2021. Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR. National Implementation Unit (NIU), Ministry of Industry and Commerce. Revised draft (June 2021). Based on author's calculations from Lao Informal Enterprise Survey (2019).

In addition, women and men have strikingly different perceptions about the fairness and consistency of business regulations and enforcement (Figure 4). Business licensing was perceived as a greater constraint by women than men, suggesting that increasing awareness about the process could benefit women entrepreneurs, combined with ensuring that line agencies eliminate redundant or conflicting policies and information. Among male respondents, 79 percent indicate that they perceive little variation in the interpretation of regulations and compliance requirements, compared with only 56 percent of female

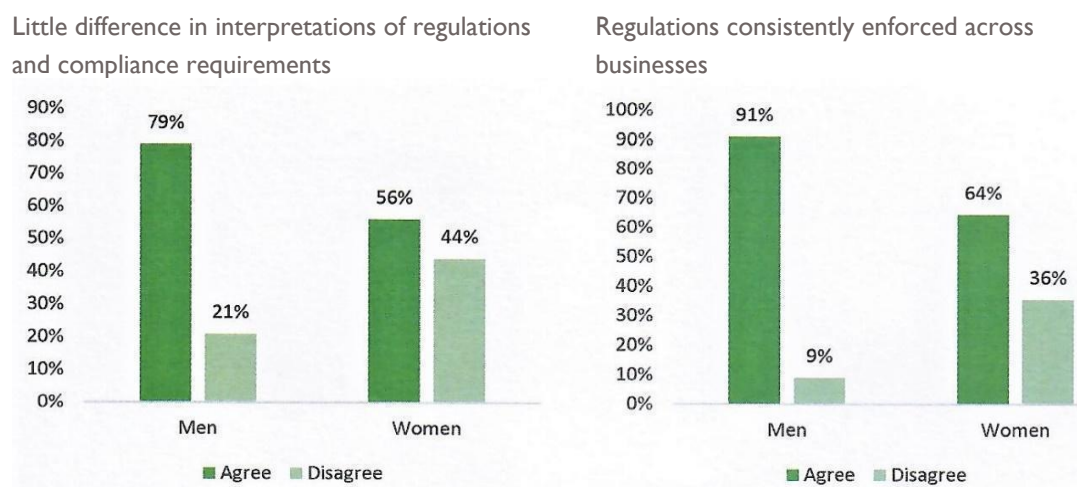
²⁷⁸ World Bank. 2017. *Formal Informality: Informal Practices of Formal Firms as a Key Business Constraint*. Washington, DC.

²⁷⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁸⁰ Key stakeholder interviews; and GOL. 2021. *Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR*. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

respondents; similarly, 91 percent of men agreed that regulations are enforced consistently across businesses, while only 64 percent of women agreed.²⁸¹ Tax policies and administration likely affect women more greatly than men, as women tend to have lower education levels, less numeracy and Lao language literacy, and are less informed about tax policies.²⁸² However, key informants also note that registration processes are “very difficult” and “unfair,” because of inconsistent or “uneven” guidance and the need to engage in “backdoor negotiations” to formally register businesses, especially for women business owners.²⁸³

Figure 4. Differences in male and female perceptions about fairness and consistency in regulations and enforcement



Adapted from: GOL. 2021. Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR. National Implementation Unit (NIU), Ministry of Industry and Commerce. Revised draft (June 2021). Based on author’s calculations from Lao Informal Enterprise Survey (2018).

REGIONAL TRADE. Lao PDR’s main export activity is cross-border trading with Thailand, China, and Vietnam.²⁸⁴ In the trade sector, women tend to be concentrated in lower level, low wage, and seasonal occupations that are considered “traditionally female.”²⁸⁵ Compared with male counterparts, they are less likely to engage in regional trade, because their products are not integrated with the supply chains of larger firms.²⁸⁶ This reduces opportunities to upscale, innovate, and link with international markets that would create value chains by adding value to raw materials and products.

²⁸¹ GOL. 2021. Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Key stakeholder interviews.

²⁸⁴ Trading Economics. 2021. “Laos Exports.” ([Link](#))

²⁸⁵ Social Impact. 2019. Gender Analysis and Stakeholder Mapping in China and Southeast Asia: Final Report. USAID Regional Development Mission in Asia, Bangkok.

²⁸⁶ International Business Initiatives. 2020. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis. Vientiane.

Women also lack information on trade and commercial regulations and procedures. A 2017 study found that women pay higher taxes and are more likely to face a tax wedge that prevents them from upgrading to more profitable small-scale cross-border trade activities.^{287, 288} Small-scale female traders were also less likely to challenge or negotiate taxes or fees at borders, reducing already minimal profit margins. This is possibly driven by a desire to minimize the time spent at the border and it may reflect security concerns as well.

Regional trade is likely to accelerate over the next 10 to 20 years as ASEAN countries move toward closer economic integration, with increased intra-ASEAN economic cooperation and a free flow of people, goods, and services. The 414-kilometer Lao PDR-People's Republic of China (PRC) railway was opened in December 2021. This stretches from the Boten border gate in northern Luang Namtha province to Vientiane Capital, with 10 passenger stations along the route in Luang-Namtha, Oudomxay, Louangphabang, and Vientiane provinces (including Vangviang district), and in Vientiane Capital.²⁸⁹

The railway has the potential to transform Lao PDR from a landlocked to a “land-linked economy,” stretching from Kunming in the PRC to Singapore.²⁹⁰ It could make the production and export of manufactured goods and agricultural products more competitive, linking Lao PDR to global and regional supply chains. The railway could make the country more attractive to investors, create new jobs, and accelerate economic growth. However, unlocking this potential, as a 2021 World Bank report posits, will necessitate reforms to improve the business and trade environment as well as investment in well-targeted complementary infrastructure, including roads that connect the railway with various trade corridors and intermodal transport options. The GOL will also need to address the heightened risk of GBV, including sex trafficking and exploitation of women and children, and other concerns, such as pollution from traffic, topographical and hydrological damage, and impacts on the health, safety, and wellbeing of workers.²⁹¹

The railway connects Lao PDR to the entire network of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reducing overland travel times. **Key informants note that there is a danger that Lao PDR will become a “transit point” for products being transported between China and Thailand, because of the lack of investment in connective infrastructure.**²⁹² As one key informant expressed, “It’s a \$7 billion, 400-kilometer railway, but 200-meter roads to railway stations haven’t been

²⁸⁷ Tax wedge is the ratio between the amount of taxes paid by an average single worker and the corresponding total labor cost for the employer. It measures the extent to which tax on labor income discourages employment. This matters because it can create inefficiencies: the bigger the tax wedge, the less incentive to engage in the activity or expand production. OECD. 2020. “Tax Wedge” ([Link](#)); and Tracey, Paul. 2021. “Tax Wedge.” ([Link](#))

²⁸⁸ Seror, Marlon, Richard Record, and Julian Clarke. 2017. *Glass Barriers: Constraints to Women's Small-Scale Cross-Border Trade in Cambodia and Lao PDR*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 8249. Washington, DC.

²⁸⁹ World Bank. 2020. *From Landlocked to Land-Linked: Unlocking the Potential of Lao-China Rail Connectivity*. Washington, D.C.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ The most common form of human trafficking (79 percent) is sexual exploitation, with victims predominantly being women and girls. Many of the Lao victims are taken to Thailand, Malaysia, or China, with approximately 90 percent of Lao trafficking victims going to Thailand. World Bank. 2020. *From Landlocked to Land-Linked: Unlocking the Potential of Lao-China Rail Connectivity*. Washington, D.C.

²⁹² Key stakeholder interviews.

built.”²⁹³ It is still too early to know what impact the railway will have on Lao PDR’s economy. However, it does seem clear that for Lao PDR to harness benefits from the BRI, investments in infrastructure will be needed (e.g., cold storage, transshipment stations, feeder roads, and a dry port).

5.2.4 SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES SUPPORT

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) account for 96 percent of all businesses in Laos.²⁹⁴ **Challenges to establishing and expanding enterprises tend to be greater for women, ethnic groups, and persons with disabilities.**²⁹⁵ They include: lower levels of literacy and Lao language proficiency; limited access to credit, pricing information, and supply chains; time and mobility constraints; and discriminatory social norms.

Access to finance or credit can help to build assets and expand businesses. Among households with loans, the main reasons for seeking credit are agricultural production (33 percent), meeting essential household expenditures (29.9 percent), and operating or expanding a business (10.2 percent).²⁹⁶ Loans are obtained primarily from the Government Bank (47.7 percent and 47.8 percent, in urban and rural areas, respectively) and the Village Development Fund (17.6 percent in both urban and rural areas).²⁹⁷ Only about one-third (31.9 percent) of women (ages 15 and older) have bank accounts at a financial institution or with a mobile money service provider.²⁹⁸ **A 2021 report examining entrepreneurship and leadership found that the most significant barrier that young women face in starting and growing businesses is inadequate access to affordable finance, business networks, and information, compounded by discriminatory gender norms.**²⁹⁹ Furthermore, key informants offer that low levels of financial literacy among women are a barrier to obtaining credit.³⁰⁰ Many women take loans in their husband’s name, as men are more comfortable with formal banking procedures, including loan repayments.³⁰¹ The priorities of the GOL’s Small and Medium Sized Enterprises Development Plan (2016–2020) have been reaffirmed in the 2021–2025 National Plan on Manufacturing and Trade. These are: 1) promote SME productivity, technology, and innovation; 2) enhance SME access to finance; 3) enhance SME access to business development services; 4) enhance SME access to, and involvement in, domestic and international markets; 5) create and develop entrepreneurs; and 6) create an enabling environment for the establishment and operation of SMEs. The

²⁹³ Key stakeholder interview.

²⁹⁴ UN. 2021. 2020 Progress Report Lao PDR-United Nations Partnership Framework 2017-2021: A Partnership for Sustainable Development. Vientiane.

²⁹⁵ International Business Initiatives. 2020. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis. Vientiane.

²⁹⁶ GOL. 2018. Lao Labor Force Survey 2017. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ UNDP. 2020. Human Development Report. New York, NY. ([Link](#))

²⁹⁹ UNDP and UNICEF. 2021. Addressing Gender Barriers to Entrepreneurship Among Girls and Young Women in South-East Asia. Bangkok: UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub and UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office.

³⁰⁰ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁰¹ Rex, Helene Carlsson, Sonomi Tanaka, Anne Kuriakose, Stephanie Kuttner, Keopphet Phoumphon, Theonakhet Saphakdy, Phothong Siliphong, Ami Thakkar, Philaiphone Vongpraseuth, Meriem Gray, and Souridahak Sakonhninhom. 2012. Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR: Reducing Vulnerability and Increasing Opportunity. The World Bank and The Asian Development Bank. ([Link](#))

government has also set a target to increase the number of small and medium enterprises by 2 percent per year, and projects that SME contributions to GDP will reach 18 percent by 2025.

“The government realizes that not many jobs are being created and is focusing on the business enabling environment, particularly in terms of trade and SME competitiveness.”

– Key Informant

Micro and small enterprises are proliferating largely because of economic necessity and the lack of other job options or opportunities. The Laos Business Environment Project is working with the GOL to provide targeted advice and training to SMEs to spur job creation, expand regional and international trade, and generate inclusive economic growth. Key informants highlight that productive capacity is limited by the lack of targeted business development services, combined with poor infrastructure, high transport costs, and limited access to market information, finance, and affordable ICTs.³⁰²

Business development services remain poorly targeted and centrally concentrated in Lao PDR. SME Service Centers (SSC) are meant to be “one-stop” shops for business development needs, providing information on legislation, training, business plan development, and marketing. However, key informants note that there are no services offered at the provincial and district level, capacity is weak, and the services provided focus on formal and medium-sized enterprises rather than informal, micro, or small enterprises, the majority of which are women-owned or women-operated.³⁰³ As a result, aspiring business owners tend to reach out to friends who are in business rather than go to the SME Service Centers, which are staffed by government employees rather than businesspeople. This limits options and opportunities, especially among those individuals who lack business networks or who live in the provinces.

Business assistance facilities (BAF) (currently funded by the Multi-donor Trust Fund including the World Bank, USAID, Australia, and Ireland) offer matching grants to businesses that submit proposals for new initiatives. These tend to focus on business expansion, such as increasing exports, creating a website, or developing a social media presence. However, according to one key stakeholder, the process is reportedly “not transparent”; it is confusing regarding what information is needed and why, and how to submit.³⁰⁴

Key informants recommend targeting business development services to the needs of micro and small enterprises, based on “user perspectives” and a more realistic understanding of their needs.³⁰⁵ They emphasize that busy business owners do not have time to attend long training programs; online self-learning platforms, they suggest, with targeted tools to support businesses, would help in providing more flexible and “right-sized” SME business development services. This would be especially beneficial for women business owners, given the burden of household and care responsibilities. Services should also include marketing tools and digital applications that support businesses’ development and growth online.

³⁰² Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁰³ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁰⁴ Key stakeholder interview.

³⁰⁵ Key stakeholder interviews.

5.2.5 INCLUSIVE SECTORS

Economic growth in Lao PDR has benefited people in the lowlands more than those in the upland areas, where minority ethnic groups are concentrated. Tourism and agriculture are complementary sectors with arguably the most potential for inclusive jobs growth in rural and remote areas, including upland areas.³⁰⁶ **Global experience suggests that increased agricultural productivity can have two to three times the poverty-reducing effect of nonagricultural growth, especially when agriculture employs a large share of the population, such as in Lao PDR.³⁰⁷ Similarly, tourism provides business opportunities and creates jobs and income streams that are more easily obtainable for the poor, women, and less-skilled in rural and remote areas.³⁰⁸**

A 2021 ADB report makes a strong case for ecotourism and agritourism models that 1) increase demand for high-quality agricultural products provided to tourism enterprises by local farmers, and 2) create opportunities in the tourism sector for employment outside of agriculture—especially for women and minority groups—that would boost off-farm earnings for rural households.³⁰⁹ It suggests that agritourism could increase agricultural production by encouraging new entrants into the sector and exposing visitors to local products. This would strengthen backward linkages by increasing demand for agriculture and rural-based goods and services, including the handicrafts that are primarily produced by women and already provide a significant income for families in Lao PDR. Forward linkages would be strengthened by attracting more visitors to rural areas and enhancing the reputation of the Lao PDR as a tourist destination. The report recommends that policies and interventions focus on increasing productivity and improving agricultural systems and value chains, including support for handicrafts as well as emerging niche market products, such as organic production and value additions for local food processing and products.

AGRICULTURE. Lao PDR remains a largely agrarian country. Agriculture accounts for 16 percent of GDP (in 2019) and 60 percent of employment (in 2020).³¹⁰ According to the 2011 Agricultural Census, two-thirds (66 percent) of rural households rely on crop production and the sale of livestock and forest products for food security and income.³¹¹ The share of dependence on agricultural income varies between provinces, with the highest proportions in the northern provinces of Xaignabouli (78 percent), Houaphan (72 percent), Luang-Namtha (67 percent), and Oudomxay (66 percent). Women make up a little over half of the agricultural workforce in Lao, but they have less access to credit and technologies—especially in upland ethnic minority areas.³¹²

³⁰⁶ ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ GOL. 2011. Lao PDR Agriculture Census.

³¹² FAO. 2018. Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Vientiane.

Women and men have equal rights to property under the Constitution, the Land Law, and the Family Law and Property Law, with land regulated by the amended Land Laws (2003 and 2019).³¹³ Joint land registration and titling is authorized for married and de facto couples. However, the 2019 Land Law provides no provision for joint titling of marital land which could result in a loss of women's land rights.³¹⁴ Moreover, the ongoing nationwide process of land mapping, registration, and titling increases the risk of eviction or expropriation without compensation, for households with no formal land title.³¹⁵ While this applies to both women and men, women are more likely to be dispossessed of land than men, particularly among patrilineal ethnic groups.³¹⁶ Women tend to lack knowledge about formal land laws and are reluctant to participate in land management meetings because of time poverty, lack of confidence, and Lao language constraints. A 2020 report argues that safeguarding women's land rights first requires a clear recognition of customary land use rights as well as identification of communal upland agricultural areas—including upland fallows, grassland, and village-managed forests—before assessing collective, individual, or mixed use ownership.³¹⁷ Only about one-third of the country's estimated 1.6 million registered land parcels have been titled, and a significant proportion of state land remains unmapped and not registered.³¹⁸

“The agrarian transition is happening in real time at an accelerated rate, with a lot of issues and variability in individual abilities to adapt.”

— Key Informant

Agriculture in Lao PDR is rapidly shifting from subsistence to market-oriented production, with uneven impacts on families in rural and remote areas. Farmers in upland areas, most of whom are from ethnic minority groups, are especially hard pressed because of the lack of infrastructure, poor quality of soils, and mountainous terrain. Key informants highlighted the problematic use of pesticides, including when women are working with their babies on their backs.³¹⁹ This stems from the material conditions in which families are living. **Ethnic minorities living in upland areas, as one key informant expressed, “Can’t make a living without using pesticides because of the poor quality of**

³¹³ The state owns all land but may grant the right to possess, use, transfer, and allow for successive inheritance to individuals without discrimination based on sex or marital status.

³¹⁴ Land Information Working Group (LIWG). n.d. Briefing Note No 4 – Women's Land Use Rights Article 86.

³¹⁵ Most people rely on land certificates, land tax bills, and family land record books to demonstrate land rights, as the costs involved in adjudicating and issuing land titles can be unaffordable. Somphongbouthakanh, Phetsakhone, and Loes Schenk-Sandbergen. 2020. *Women and Land Rights in Lao PDR: Rural Transformation and a Dream of Secure Tenure*. Land Information Working Group.

³¹⁶ Rex, Helene Carlsson, Sonomi Tanaka, Anne Kuriakose, Stephanie Kuttner, Keophet Phoumphon, Theonakhet Saphakdy, Phothong Siliphone, Ami Thakkar, Philaiphone Vongpraseuth, Meriem Gray, and Souridahak Sakonhnhom. 2012. *Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR: Reducing Vulnerability and Increasing Opportunity*. The World Bank and The Asian Development Bank. ([Link](#))

³¹⁷ Somphongbouthakanh, Phetsakhone, and Loes Schenk-Sandbergen. 2020. *Women and Land Rights in Lao PDR: Rural Transformation and a Dream of Secure Tenure*. Land Information Working Group.

³¹⁸ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.

³¹⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

soils.”³²⁰ Another factor is women’s time poverty. Using pesticides can be a quick and effective short-term solution (however unsafe) to reducing pests and increasing production.

“There is a need to pay more attention to women’s labor – women are living a life of drudgery.”

– Key Informant

A key finding from the GESI analysis undertaken by the Lao Microenterprise Project is that decision-making over agricultural production and use of income is often approached as a “collective family matter,” though this can differ for different ethnic groups.³²¹ In Lao-Tai families, women take the lead role in market sales and negotiation and managing household expenses, with men preferring to undertake agricultural work, while in Hmong families, men take primary responsibility for determining productive and agricultural activities. In response, the project reinforces the benefits of joint decision-making (of husband and wife) in managing all resources (land use, time use, working capital, and sales decisions), along with additional sensitization in Hmong communities to encourage both husbands and wives to attend trainings. This has led to more women actively participating in both trainings and decision making.

Several projects and social enterprises are working with farming households to expand marketing and value chains through niche production, primarily in coffee, tea, and honey, to increase production and incomes particularly among female farmers. However, key informants cite problems with quality control, consistency in production-to-market value chains, and a “missing middle” of private sector agro-input suppliers.³²² They also note that female farmers benefit less from agricultural extension services, whose mostly male providers concentrate on providing services and information to male farmers.³²³

TOURISM. The Lao PDR’s tourism industry was growing rapidly before the pandemic, and the new railway is expected to boost tourism further. International tourism receipts grew by one-third from 2014 to 2019, from \$641.6 million to 934.7 million, contributing about 10 percent to GDP.³²⁴ An estimated 348,700 jobs are directly sustained by tourism in Lao PDR, including travel, accommodation, and retail enterprises.³²⁵ Women comprise 63 percent of Lao PDR’s tourism workforce.³²⁶

Tourism offers opportunities for inclusive economic growth, as it supports jobs creation both directly (through demand and production) and indirectly (through backward and forward links to other sectors). The sector encompasses rural areas and workers who are poor, female, or less skilled or educated. The sector creates potential for improving infrastructure

³²⁰ Key stakeholder interview.

³²¹ Laos Microenterprise. 2020. *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis*. June 2020.

³²² Key stakeholder interviews.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Data from statistical reports prepared by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. Cited in: ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³²⁵ World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC). 2021. *Lao Economic Impact Report 2021*. London. Cited in: ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³²⁶ Ibid.

in rural areas and for creating short-distance value-chain additions for local agricultural produce and handicrafts or other products that can be marketed to tourist destinations.³²⁷

The GOL's 2018 tourism and hospitality enterprise survey assessed 1,270 businesses with 42,600 workers and found that the handicrafts and accommodation subsectors generate the most jobs. Women especially predominate in handicrafts production (83.4 percent), with handicrafts providing about a one-third share of tourism employment (Figure 5).³²⁸ Notably, vulnerable workers comprised 8.6 percent of the tourism workforce, with most (16.8 percent) working in handicrafts, followed by resorts (10.9 percent) and travel services (8.1 percent) which also tend to be in rural areas. The survey categorized vulnerable workers as meeting at least one of the following criteria: member of a poor household; living in rural/remote areas; lacking basic education; ethnic minority; orphan; survivor of human trafficking, sexual crime, or violence; disabled, affected by chronic illness or drug addiction.

Figure 5. Different Types of Employment in Tourism Sector

Subsector	Jobs	Share of Tourism Employment (%)	Women (%)	Temporary Workers (%)	Foreign Workers (%)	Vulnerable Workers (%)	Vacancies
Hotel	8,564	20.3	56.1	1.2	5.0	3.0	183
Resort	2,203	5.2	55.2	2.3	3.5	10.9	39
Guesthouse	2,841	6.7	59.7	0.2	1.2	5.6	50
Restaurant	4,526	10.7	59.4	7.1	4.2	3.9	47
Entertainment	3,594	8.5	41.8	1.7	0.4	1.5	52
Travel services	1,389	3.3	26.4	14.9	2.6	8.1	61
Tourist attraction	4,728	11.2	45.0	2.2	0.3	6.3	201
Handicrafts	14,435	34.2	83.4	0.9	0.5	16.3	707
Total	42,260	100.0	62.5	2.3	2.0	8.6	1,399

Source: Ministry of Education and Sports. 2018. Adapted from ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

Key informants cited handicraft production as an essential income source for families, especially in rural and remote areas.³²⁹ Northern Laos is particularly known for traditional crafts, including woven textiles that are popular among foreign tourists and sometimes exported. But having these craft production

³²⁷ ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines; ADB. 2017. *Lao PDR: Accelerating Structural Transformation for Inclusive Growth*. Country Diagnostic Study. Manila. [\(Link\)](#); and ADB. 2017. *Tourism Sector Assessment, Strategy, and Road Map for Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, and Viet Nam (2016–2018)*. Manila.

³²⁸ Ministry of Education and Sports. 2018. Cited in: ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³²⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

skills does not necessarily translate into a good income, especially for labor-intensive items made by women whose time and labor tend to be undervalued. In other countries, national fair-trade crafts associations have helped both to secure fair remuneration for producers and to sustain quality handicrafts production. Some existing initiatives work with women in villages to develop and design high-quality or niche products for marketing and sales based on fair trade principles, such as the textile-focused social enterprise, Ock Pop Tok. These and other enterprises following fair trade practices could be certified under a national fair-trade association, as a potential win-win for both producers and consumers.

As in other countries, information technology provides a link to tourism services and for providing visitor information. This is a critical connection for the industry, with search engines and websites used to both gather and provide destination information and for booking transport, accommodation, and tours. The larger hotels and tour operators use digital tools and services for direct marketing, to improve customer experiences, and to automate reservations and other business processes. However, few small and medium-sized tourism enterprises can provide or use digital services because of relatively high broadband costs and low ICT skills.³³⁰ As of July 2019, communications infrastructure covered 95 percent of villages with 2G and 45 percent of the country with 3G, but rural and more remote communities remain underserved.³³¹ **According to a 2018 World Bank report, while mobile phone ownership is relatively high, at around 87 percent, the subscription rate for mobile broadband internet is 35 percent and fixed broadband service is only 3 percent.**³³² There are also stark differences between rural and urban internet use. About half of those living in urban areas (48.3 percent men and 51.7 percent women) used the Internet during the last three months, compared to only one-fifth of those in rural areas (19 percent of men and 16.6 percent of women).³³³ Key informants note that women are less likely than men to have access to mobile phones with broadband internet as these are usually shared, with men's access and use prioritized over women.³³⁴ They also note that internet costs are higher for poorer families, who are unable to pay in advance for monthly services and are charged based on usage at higher average rates.³³⁵

Lao PDR was one of the last Southeast Asian nations to adopt the Internet, and the country is lagging behind comparable regional economies in terms of accessibility, quality, and affordability of Internet services.³³⁶ A 2019 study examining the relationship between financial literacy and awareness of fintech development found low levels of financial literacy and fintech adoption (only 3.7 percent of survey respondents); men, urban residents, more educated individuals, and younger persons are more likely to

³³⁰ ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³³¹ USAID. 2020. Digital Asia Accelerator: Gender and Social Inclusion Action Plan.

³³² World Bank. 2018. *Digital Connectivity in Lao PDR Lagging Behind Peers: A Short Assessment with Policy Recommendations to Catch Up*. Washington, DC. Cited in: ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³³³ GOL. 2017. "Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey." Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB). Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

³³⁴ Key stakeholder interviews.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ USAID. 2020. Digital Asia Accelerator: Gender and Social Inclusion Action Plan.

be aware of fintech products than women, rural residents, and older persons.³³⁷ Among those surveyed, more than 80 percent of respondents report using a telephone, but only 30 percent have a smartphone. Use of smartphones in urban areas is double that in rural areas (47.3 percent versus 23.9 percent). Increasingly, travelers are using digital booking platforms and mobile applications to pay for services and goods, and Lao businesses' use of online resources (such as Alibaba, Airbnb, and Expedia) is lower than regional counterparts; Lao PDR lists fewer than 550 tours on TripAdvisor, compared to the 3,475 tours listed for Cambodia.³³⁸ Slow adoption of fintech, including tourism-related marketing and procurement, may result in expanding the gender gap in Internet knowledge and use. The Laos Business Environment Project is supporting SME capacity building on digital platforms to support competition in the digital economy, including e-commerce, food delivery, and software development. This program should provide targeted capacity building for youth, especially young women, to support increased engagement and employment opportunities in the digital economy and online platforms.

Ecotourism in the Lao PDR is growing, with successful examples including Louang-Namtha's Nam Ha national protected area and Bokeo's Nam Kan national protected area. Recently, the GOL established broad guidelines for ecotourism, focusing on careful capacity management, sustainable use of resources, respect for cultural and natural diversity, and involvement of local communities in the decision-making process. Support in the implementation of these guidelines would help to safeguard Lao PDR's natural resources and heritage, while expanding opportunities for local communities, ethnic minorities, and women in more remote locations.

The Ministry of Education and Sports estimates that 2,000 tourism and hospital graduates enter the workforce each year.³³⁹ Only 12.6 percent of tourism workers have received any type of formal training, and 3.1 percent do not have any tourism-related qualification. Among the balance of workers in the tourism workforce, most lack basic literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills which are needed to perform effectively. Handicraft production, performing arts, and tour guiding are reportedly the hardest occupational vacancies to fill, as they require technical skills or foreign language aptitude.

Lao PDR needs to invest in human resources to deliver higher-value tourism services and to address skills gaps. With additional support, the Lao PDR National Institute for Tourism and Hospitality (LANITH) could help to address the lack of qualified educational institutions and training centers for tourism. This should focus on developing managerial and digital skills (both entry or beginner and expert levels) and should be made accessible by increasing the number of training centers, especially at the provincial level, and offering on-the-job internships and online distance learning opportunities.

³³⁷ Fintech refers to any automation of the financial sector, including advances in financial literacy, advice, and education, such as streamlining of lending and borrowing, retail banking, money transfers and payments. Morgan, P. J., and L. Q. Trinh. 2019. *Fintech and Financial Literacy in the Lao PDR*. ADBI Working Paper 933. Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute. ([Link](#))

³³⁸ ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

³³⁹ Ministry of Education and Sports. 2018. Cited in: ADB. 2021. *Developing Agriculture and Tourism for Inclusive Growth in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila, Philippines.

5.2.6 ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

The Women's Entrepreneurial Center, located in Vientiane Capital, provides a space for women to learn the skills they need to start or grow their existing businesses. The Center has partnerships with the Lao Women's Union, the Lao Handicraft Association, the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Lao Businesswomen's Association, and the Lao Microfinance Institution.³⁴⁰ Women-managed firms are reported to be less innovative, although this may reflect limitations in the sectors in which they predominate.³⁴¹

Constraints to growth-oriented entrepreneurship for women in Lao PDR include: limited knowledge/exposure to innovative practices that could assist in product differentiation; limited opportunities to upgrade business practices and technical skills; limited opportunities to network outside of family and friends; lack of capital for expansion; and low level of confidence to take risks.³⁴² Moreover, women tend to lack role models who can provide support and advice, suggesting that opportunities for networking and mentorship should be increased.³⁴³

Women's lack of confidence was repeatedly mentioned by key informants, suggesting that business development services are needed that include a focus on personal initiative and confidence building, with the aim of addressing psycho-social factors that inhibit business development or expansion.³⁴⁴ A useful example is the Support Her Enterprise (SHE) Investments Program in Cambodia, launched in partnership with UNDP Cambodia in 2020. The SHE Incubator and Accelerator Program provides professional training, mentoring, coaching, and consulting to female entrepreneurs. It is designed to address gender-specific barriers that young female entrepreneurs face—such as cultural and family pressures, lack of financial literacy and financial management skills, a lack of separation between business and family finances, low self-confidence, and lack of business management and ICT skills.³⁴⁵

With support from the US Embassy, STELLA (an organization working to support education and career planning with youth) undertook a survey in 2020 to better understand youth perspectives.³⁴⁶ One of the things they learned was that more youth are aspiring to be entrepreneurs, and that this trend is even strong among high school students. Most business and startup programs focus on university students,

³⁴⁰ LWU. 2018. Lao PDR Gender Profile. Vientiane.

³⁴¹ GOL. 2021. Gender Study on Identification of Key Constraints affecting Women-owned and Women-managed Enterprises doing Business in Lao PDR. National Implementation Unit (NIU) and Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

³⁴² Webb, Julian, Anushka Thewarapperuma, and Jill Lynda Sawers. 2014. Growing women-led enterprises in the Mekong: testing a methodology for accelerating growth. Washington, DC: World Bank.

³⁴³ GOL. 2016. An Assessment of Gender Dimensions of the Manufacturing and Service Sectors. Lao Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

³⁴⁴ Key stakeholder interviews.

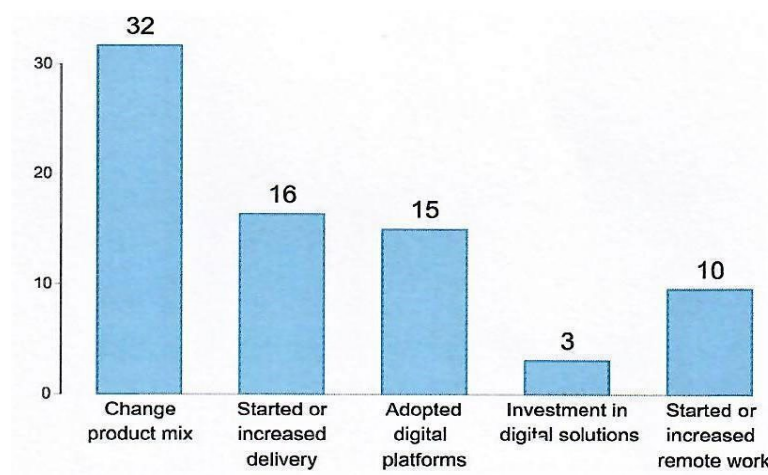
³⁴⁵ UNDP and UNICEF. 2021. *Addressing Gender Barriers to Entrepreneurship Among Girls and Young Women in South-East Asia*. Bangkok: UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub and UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office.

³⁴⁶ This survey is not a public document. Key stakeholder interview.

with the needs of youth under 18 years old not addressed. STELLA recommends working with high school students as well as university students to support establishing an “entrepreneurial mindset.”³⁴⁷

One potential positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on long-term productivity is accelerated digital adoption.³⁴⁸ Evidence from the Lao Business Pulse Survey (BPS) suggests that about 16 percent of firms have invested in digital technologies or adopted new delivery methods that are associated with lower sales losses. The main response has been a repackaging of the mix of products or services (Figure 6): around 16 percent of businesses are starting or increasing delivery or carry-out services, and 10 percent are starting or increasing home-based work.

Figure 6. Lao PDR firms’ adjustment mechanisms, by percent



Source: Adapted from World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery*. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region. August 2021. Based on Lao PDR Business Pulse Surveys: 04/21/2021-05/21/2021.

Digital platforms are proliferating throughout Southeast Asia, expanding opportunities for entrepreneurs and enterprises. Lockdowns and business closures have moved demand for goods and services to digital platforms, including online shopping or e-commerce, e-banking, and online entertainment; as the pandemic begins to wane it is likely that these consumer habits will remain. It is unclear whether women will be able to benefit from work opportunities on digital platforms, given their household and care burdens. Virtual work presents an opportunity, but it requires specific skills to meet performance standards as well as precautions to keep individuals safe from online threats including GBV and compromise of personal identity information (PII) and financial information.

The 2018 LSIS report notes stark differences in access to the Internet and computers, particularly between rural and urban areas and between wealth quintiles, among those aged 15 to 49.³⁴⁹ About one-

³⁴⁷ Key stakeholder interview.

³⁴⁸ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery*. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region.

³⁴⁹ Lao PDR. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS) 2017.

third of men (30.7 percent) and women (29.6 percent) report ever using the internet, but this differs dramatically by locale. Just 18.4 percent of women and 21.1 percent of men in rural areas report Internet use, compared to 51.7 percent of women and 51.4 percent of men in urban areas. In terms of wealth, just 6 percent of households in the poorest quintile report ever using the internet, versus 69.3 percent in the richest. Lao-tai are most likely to have used the internet (at 38.9 percent), compared with Mon-Khmer (13.4 percent), Hmong-Mien (19.9 percent), and Sino-Tibetan (19.3 percent). Similarly, 31 percent of urban households report owning a computer, versus just 5.2 percent of rural households; just 0.4 percent of households in the poorest wealth quintile own a computer, compared to 48.6 percent in the richest quintile. This also differs among ethno-linguistic groups: 17.8 percent of Lao-Tai own computers in comparison with Mon-Khmer (3.3 percent), Hmong-Mien (8.6 percent), and Sino-Tibetan (7.3 percent). In addition, men are more likely to have ever used a computer (17.9 percent) than women (13.9 percent). Those averages mask large geographic differences: men's use of computers varies from 9.2 percent in rural areas to 36.7 in urban areas, and women's use ranges from 5.8 percent in rural areas to 30 percent in urban areas.

New technologies and digital platforms can create opportunities for those who have connectivity as well as computer skills. A 2020 UNICEF report notes that jobs increasingly require training in ICT, and that young people should acquire essential ICT skills. It recommends strengthening learning of ICT skills among teachers and secondary level students, particularly in non-urban areas, and points to the need for an overall ICT strategy or master plan to guide ICT uptake within education and for the country overall.³⁵⁰

A key criticism of digital platform work is that it belongs to the informal or “gig” economy, providing no social protections or safeguards for workers. While this is true, given the low level of job growth in Lao PDR, ICT work may be the best available option for youth of any gender—at least in the short term. In the longer term, experiences from other countries suggest that it is possible to introduce regulations that help to safeguard workers' rights and provide access to some benefits and social protection.³⁵¹

5.2.7 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to the World Bank, Laos' GDP fell from 6.3 percent in 2018 to 4.8 percent in 2019, primarily due to natural disasters that affected the agricultural sector. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Lao PDR planned to graduate from Least Developed Country status by 2024; the target has since been extended to 2026, due to the impacts of the pandemic. COVID-19 has intensified Lao PDR's macroeconomic vulnerabilities, as limited fiscal and foreign currency buffers constrain the ability of the government to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic.³⁵²

The GOL reacted swiftly to the pandemic, and the number of infections remained relatively low until a second surge in the spring and summer of 2021. Most cases are among males and females in the 20–29 age group (4,160 and 4,244 cases, respectively), followed by the 30–39 age group (2,507 and 1,926 cases

³⁵⁰ UNICEF. 2020. *Country Report Lao People's Democratic Republic: Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017 MICS*.

³⁵¹ ILO. 2018. “The Architecture of Digital Labor Platforms: Policy Recommendations on Platform Design for Worker Well-being.” *ILO Future of Work Research Paper Series*, no. 3. ([Link](#))

³⁵² U.S. State Department. 2020. *Laos 2020 Investment Climate*. ([Link](#))

respectively).³⁵³ The initial cases originated mainly from migrant returnees arriving by land borders from Thailand; COVID-19 has since become primarily community-spread.

COVID-19 has negatively affected economic growth and worsened poverty and inequalities. Fragile businesses and supply chains were adversely affected—especially the informal sector and tourism and hospitality.³⁵⁴ Migrant and informal workers in vulnerable employment, including those in MSMEs and those without formal contracts, are at the highest risk of losing their livelihoods and remain invisible from government-provided support. The lack of jobs has widened the poverty gap between urban and rural areas. Moreover, women are more affected than men, as they are concentrated in industries hardest hit by the pandemic such as tourism and related services, retail trade, and manufacturing. Many of the unemployed are daily workers living in rural areas or migrant workers (both domestic and from abroad).

The 2021 (August) World Bank Economic Monitor, focusing on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses and households, suggests that to support a more robust and equal recovery, GOL policy and development partner investments should prioritize (1) those with limited access to services and (2) the poor, who have limited coping measures.³⁵⁵ Priority targets are informal workers in the hardest hit sectors that show signs of sluggish recovery (i.e., manufacturing, hospitality, and transport), as well as household/family businesses. The report also notes that the influx of returning migrant workers has worsened pre-existing structural problems in the domestic labor market, including the need to improve labor market information systems to reduce mismatches in skills and employment.

5.3 ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

Below are 2021 U.S. Government standard foreign assistance (F) indicators that USAID/Laos may consider for use in monitoring, evaluation, and learning in this sector.

TABLE 7. ECONOMIC GROWTH: KEY ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS BY KEY ISSUE	
KEY ISSUE	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
Employment and Self-Employment	<p>EG.6-12 Percent of individuals with new employment following participation in USG-assisted workforce development programs, (disaggregated by sex, age, disability status, and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>EG.6-15 Percent of individuals with better employment following participation in USG-assisted workforce development programs, (disaggregated by sex, age, disability status, and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>Supp-14 Percent of individuals with improved digital literacy skills following participation in USG-assisted programs (disaggregated by sex, age, disability status, and ethno-linguistic group)</p>
Small and Medium Enterprise Support	<p>GNDR-2 Percentage of female participants in USG-assisted programs designed to increase access to productive economic resources (assets, credit, income, or employment)</p> <p>EG.5.2-1 Number of firms receiving USG-funded technical assistance for improving business performance (disaggregated by firm-owner sex, disability status, and ethno-linguistic group)</p>

³⁵³ WHO. September 2021. *Lao PDR: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report #38*. ([Link](#))

³⁵⁴ Southichack, Mana, Phothong Siliphong, and Bounmy Inthakesone. 2020. *Socioeconomic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in Lao PDR*. UNDP and Vientiane.

³⁵⁵ World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR Economic Monitor: A Path to Recovery. Thematic Section: Impacts of COVID-19 on Businesses and Households*. Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment Global Practice, East Asia, and Pacific Region.

	<p>EG.5.2-2 Number of private sector firms that have improved management practices or technologies as a result of USG assistance.</p> <p>EG.5-3 Number of microenterprises supported by USG assistance, (disaggregated by sex of enterprise owner, disability status and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>EG.4.2-4 Number of days of USG-funded training provided to support microenterprise development</p> <p>EG.4.2-5 Number of days of USG-funded technical assistance provided to support microenterprise development</p> <p>YOUTH-3 Percentage of participants who are youth (15-29) participating in USG-assisted programs designed to increase access to productive economic resources [IM-level]</p>
Agriculture, Tourism, and Handicrafts	<p>EG.3.2-2 Number of individuals in the agri-food system who have applied improvement management practices or technologies with USG assistance (disaggregated by sex, age, disability status, and ethno-linguistic group)</p>

6 DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE: FINDINGS, EVIDENCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TABLE 8. SNAPSHOT OF RELEVANT STATISTICS

- Women's representation in national parliament is 21.95 percent.
- Women's representation in government institutions overall is 7 percent (district level) and 2.6 percent (village level).
- 42 percent of women express a lack of confidence in the justice system.
- Out of 312 registered lawyers, 72 are women; most are based in the capital.
- Laos PDR remains on Tier 2 for CTIP, meaning that it does not meet the minimum international standards to eliminate human trafficking and support victims, but has made strides to improve trafficking conditions.
- 58 percent of women justify domestic violence.
- 30.3 percent of women (and a higher percentage of rural women) reported at least one of the three types of partner violence (emotional, physical, sexual), with emotional violence being the predominant form of partner violence.³⁵⁶
- Among women who experienced physical or sexual partner violence, 43.2 percent never told anyone.³⁵⁷

6.1 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings and recommendations are presented below by subsector in order of priority, based on issues identified by key informants and stakeholders and in key reports from the literature review.

6.1.1 LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

Women's decision-making capacity, political participation, and leadership opportunities are limited at the provincial and local levels. Though there has been an increase in female politicians in the National Assembly, the numbers and percentages of female leaders in rural and remote communities remain very low. Patriarchal structures, fewer education opportunities, and heavy workloads disadvantage opportunities for women's leadership.

³⁵⁶ National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Lao PDR. 2015. Summary Report: A Study on Violence Against Women in Lao PDR, Lao National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experiences 2014.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

- Increase mentorship of female political leaders with young women leaders through partnerships, such as with Lao National University and the Lao Women's Union Women's Political Leadership Training program.
- Support male and female parliamentary leaders in joint initiatives and outreach to constituencies in gathering data on gender and social inclusion in leadership and consultations.
- Provide technical support to NCAWMC on the implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021–2025) by conducting assessments and developing more detailed action plans for implementation by ministries at the provincial, district, and village levels.
- Support training of NCAWMC and SubCAWs at provincial and district level in how to conduct gender analyses to support the context-specific implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality.
- Strengthen public engagement skills with National Assembly and Provincial Assembly members on gender equality and social inclusion, building on the network of assembly members who have undergone training of trainers (TOTs), to expand the pool of gender resource specialists; provide additional training for new members.
- Provide support and resources such as fundraising training, campaign technical assistance, and leadership capacity-building for female candidates, candidates with disabilities, and candidates who identify as LGBTQI+ persons.

6.1.2 LEGAL AID

Access to legal aid is hindered by restricted mobility, COVID-19, rural isolation, disability status, lack of knowledge of rights, gender identity, and lack of ICT access. Women tend to rely on village-based or customary dispute resolution mechanisms, because they lack access to legal aid. Women and those with low education do not know how to submit grievance claims; lower socioeconomic status and remote locations are correlated with low legal knowledge and low confidence in self-protection and legal rights.

- Increase free mobile legal aid clinics with interpreters and assistive devices, especially in rural areas, to expand access to legal services for ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ persons, and persons with disabilities (such as hearing and visual impairment).
- Increase the capacity of MOJ and legal aid providers to explore innovative approaches of outreach (beyond mobile legal clinics), including social media posts (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and use of WhatsApp to increase access to legal information and advice.
- Working with LYU, LWU, and CSOs, support increased awareness and knowledge of legal rights through approaches such as interactive Q&As, role-plays, and videos, particularly in rural communities; ensure interpretation in predominant local languages to engage men, women, and youth.

- In cooperation with civil society, design and implement awareness programs for rural and remote areas that explain basic concepts of law, to increase understanding about how to exercise rights, especially for women.

VMUs reinforce traditional gender roles and responsibilities in mediation, rather than individual legal rights under the law. VMUs tend to not be gender-balanced or gender-sensitive, with few women engaged. This raises questions as to whether village-based justice is able to provide unbiased and adequate protection for women, given traditional and cultural gender biases.

- Provide training to VMU appointees on equality provisions in formal laws: 2004 Law on the Development and Protection of Women and Children, 2004 Law on Women’s Development and Protection, and 2014 Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children.
- Provide training to VMU appointees on CEDAW recommendations as well as on UNFPA’s Essential Services Package on GBV, 2021–2025 NPAVAWVAC, and 2021–2025 National Action Plan on Gender Equality.

Most legal providers are localized to urban areas, affecting access especially for women and vulnerable populations who have fewer resources and less mobility. There are relatively few female lawyers, and lawyers in general have limited knowledge of GBV in terms of prevention, response, and justice.

- Encourage women to pursue legal studies through scholarships and mentoring (with women lawyers) and outreach to secondary schools and universities.
- Provide training to professors and law students on GBV and the importance of social inclusion among underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities.
- Support government targets to increase female leadership in the legal system through mentorship, scholarships, and awareness programs for high school graduates, to promote enrollment in legal studies and increase the number of female lawyers and women in the judiciary.

Persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by distance and access to legal aid. There are some mobile clinics for legal aid, but these are limited by a lack of experienced lawyers and insufficient funding. Legal access issues also include a lack of sign language interpreters, lack of transportation, and inaccessibility (e.g., stairs).

- Expand support for mobile legal aid clinics that offer pro bono services for persons with disabilities; clinics need to be staffed with experienced lawyers (or paralegals) and interpreters for sign language as well as ethnic minority languages.

6.1.3 COUNTER TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS (CTIP)

Vulnerability to trafficking is higher for rural households that are poor and land insecure, economic migrants with limited education and Lao language skills, and individuals with non-binary gender identities.

- Expand information campaigns to rural communities on the legal rights of migrants, to enable safe migration in coordination with CSOs.
- Increase life and vocational skills training for at-risk populations and among TIP survivors in coordination with existing shelters, the Lao Women's Union, and Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare vocational training institutes. Incorporate gender equality, financial literacy, and confidence building components.
- Conduct a risk analysis examining the vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ persons to GBV, to develop and implement strategies for prevention and mitigation in coordination with the Lao Youth Union and the Gender Development Association.
- **Traditional customs perpetuate early marriage, especially among some ethnic minority groups and in rural and remote areas.** Early marriage is most common among poor households with lower levels of education. Parents are persuaded by marriage brokers to “marry” their daughters for economic gain, with some girls/women forced into marriages and sexual exploitation, including commercial sex work.
- Support social and behavioral change communication and information campaigns in local dialects, engaging with community leaders to increase awareness about trafficking risks and other dangers and consequences of early marriage, including impacts on health, education, nutrition, and violence and abuse.
- Provide information about trafficking, including child marriage, commercial sex, and forced labor, in partnership with CSOs, Child Protection Network, and youth peer education programs in secondary schools.

Inadequate district-level immigration infrastructure and understanding of TIP persist, allowing easy transit points for human trafficking of Lao nationals. The 3rd National Secretariat/Anti-Trafficking Department National Action Plan (2021–2025) was recently approved, but implementation as well as integration of gender-responsive provisions remain unclear. At the regional level, authorities lack training in how to screen for and counsel trafficking victims. Most police are male and lack knowledge of how to identify trafficking victims or about referral mechanisms for counseling and support, especially for female survivors. The central National Secretariat/Anti-Trafficking Department (NS/ATD) is the only institution capable of formally identifying and referring victims of human trafficking.

- Provide technical assistance to the National Secretariat to develop anti-trafficking action plans at the provincial level, integrating gender-sensitive guidelines in prevention and response. Plans should cover victim identification, protection, and gender-sensitive reintegration (responsive to unique gender identity, ethnicity, disability, and age needs).
- Strengthen the capacity of ministries to identify victims and to refer them to gender-responsive legal and counseling support, working with the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and Lao Women's Union.

- Provide training to immigration officials on how to screen for and identify potential trafficking victims. Training should include a focus on men (especially subject to labor trafficking) and on the heightened risks of trafficking for girls, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons.

The new rail link (Belt Road Initiative) will potentially "land-link" Lao PDR's economy and reduce overland travel times significantly; however, it also increases TIP risks.

- Conduct a TIP risk assessment including the impact on vulnerable groups (women, girls, ethnic minorities). Conduct awareness-raising informational campaigns to mitigate risks.
- Strengthen CTIP prevention and response mechanisms in coordination with CSOs and police, particularly in areas with increased risk due to the new railway.

6.1.4 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

GBV is perpetuated by child marriage, high adolescent birth rates, and harmful social norms, which are all exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. There is a need for increased services for GBV survivors and a need for updated data, given that the most recent survey was conducted in 2014.

- Expand legal assistance, psychosocial support, and reintegration services in rural communities for GBV survivors, particularly for vulnerable populations (women, children, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities).
- Support a country-wide prevalence survey on Violence Against Women and Girls to support formal data collection to better inform programs and services, in collaboration with Lao Statistic Bureau, NCAWMC, LWU, WHO, and UNFPA.

Cultural customs influence what is perceived as domestic violence. Conflict mediation by VMUs reinforces cultural perceptions and tends to promote restoration of harmony rather than restitution or protection of survivors. The social stigma of reporting GBV discourages many women from doing so, as they may be ostracized from their community. Women are also precluded from making a claim on their own behalf.

- Provide GBV sensitization training with VMUs, community development committees, village councils, and community members, in coordination with LWU, LYU and CSOs focusing on violence prevention and mitigation. Trainings should focus on how to support survivors, available services, and provisions of the 2021–2025 NPAVAWVAC, and should incorporate ways of engaging men, women, youth, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.
- Engage male leaders to increase awareness of the negative impacts of GBV on the family and community.
- Support awareness raising campaigns through radio/TV, social media, WhatsApp, poster boards, village councils, and VMUs, highlighting the value and importance of girl's education and women's

representation in leadership positions as well as legal rights in relation to domestic violence cases and other forms of GBV.

There is a lack of GBV data, referral procedures, standard reporting requirements, and protocols for coordination among the police, legal services, shelters, and rehabilitation services. UNDP is conducting an institutional capacity needs assessment of VAW and will provide technical and financial assistance to support implementation of the National Action Plan, working with LWU and NCAWMC in the legal sector to involve the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Public Security, People Supreme Court, and Supreme People's Prosecutor.

- Liaise with UNDP, LWU, and NCAWMC on the work undertaken by the Khan Hom Project within the police and justice sectors to support coordinated and expanded GBV prevention and response systems, as well as clear referral pathways across sectors, organizations, and government entities.
- Coordinate with UNDP on the rollout/training of the Essential Service Package and National Guidelines for SOPs for GBV prevention and response within the police and justice sector, focusing on assistance to LWU, NCAWMC, and SubCAWs and implementation at the provincial and district levels, including villages.

6.2 DATA AND EVIDENCE

Despite equal rights in legislation, women continue to face restrictions in accessing full family, property, land, labor, and civil rights, especially in rural areas where social norms and cultural traditions impede women from securing justice and equitable protection.³⁵⁸ Lao PDR is making efforts to address disparities in legal aid access, to implement counter-trafficking strategies, and to protect vulnerable populations from GBV. However, much greater measures are needed to secure legal representation for all citizens no matter their location, to protect the population against human trafficking by resolving the economic factors contributing to the issue, as well as to support women and girls in receiving not only legal support but protection from GBV.

This section identifies key areas for gender inclusion in the areas of democracy, human rights, and governance, drawing on gender-related opportunities and constraints as highlighted by key informants and stakeholders and in the literature review and SOW. Data and evidence are presented in the following subsections: leadership and representation; legal aid; countering trafficking in persons; and gender-based violence.

6.2.1 LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

The increase in female elected officials at the national level (currently at 21.95 percent) has not been mirrored at the local level, where patriarchal traditions, lower levels of education, and socioeconomic circumstances create barriers for women in politics, decision making, and leadership. Women's representation in government institutions is just 7 percent and 2.6 percent at district and village levels, respectively. Low targets for female representation

³⁵⁸ Lao Women's Union. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*.

(20 to 25 percent at the national level, with no targets for the local level) have left female voices marginalized and the needs of women unmet, as corroborated by key informants.³⁵⁹

“Underrepresentation in all levels of governance leaves the voices of women unheard and their needs unaddressed.”

– Key Informant

As corroborated by key informants, there is a need to provide capacity building and empowerment to female political leaders at all levels—enhancing leadership skills, building confidence, and strengthening the public engagement skills of women in both national and provincial assemblies.³⁶⁰ Helvetas has worked with ADWLE and Gender and Development Association (GDA) in conducting TOTs with national and provincial assembly members to create a pool of gender resource specialists. This network could be instrumental in providing additional training and mentorship for new members. The program also supported LWU in conducting a media campaign to create social awareness on the importance of female parliamentarians.

Both women and men parliamentarian leaders need to engage more effectively with their constituencies, and they need greater awareness and understanding of gender constraints. Improving digital access and literacy among women leaders could help them strengthen their outreach and communication with constituents. Key informants also expressed the need to increase community awareness of the importance of women serving as leaders: to have their voices heard and to affect the decisions that impact families’ lives, including shifting norms relating to male and female roles and the value of shared power and decision making.³⁶¹ To do this, it will be vital to engage men in the discourse and cultivate positive images of men sharing household responsibilities and working with women political leaders. Key informants indicated that helping men become aware of their privilege and power would assist in equality measures, by helping males understand the importance of women having knowledge and the resulting benefits for their family and community.³⁶² Key informants also emphasized the importance of working with the Lao Women’s Union and the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children (NCAWMC) to increase women’s political involvement and strengthen gender mainstreaming throughout government line ministries.³⁶³ More must be done at the provincial level, setting up hubs in the north, central, and south to get information and reach out to the most vulnerable and rurally based. In Parliament, the capacity of women members must be strengthened to connect to the issues among their constituencies and to build stronger awareness within their communities on gender issues.

Article 7 of the Constitution provides a mandate for the Lao Women’s Union, which was officially established in 1955 to promote and protect the rights of Laotian women and children and which is instrumental in promoting women in governance. The SubCAWs throughout the country promote the

³⁵⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

advancement of women across ministries and state organizations as well as at provincial and capital administrative levels, creating a broad network of gender focal points. **But because seniority within the government was a determining factor in selecting SubCAWs members, most selected members are male, often lacking in understanding of gender concepts and mainstreaming.**

“It is necessary to understand what makes something equitable, not equal. People think that laws don’t discriminate, but substantive inequalities remain for families who are poor, don’t speak Lao, might have a disability, or lack government ID cards which give access to hospitals, and the ability to open a bank account or buy land.”

– Key Informant

The Fourth National Plan of Action on Gender Equality, 2021–2025 (NPAGE) covers a broad spectrum of gender-responsive priority activities and targets, including awareness raising and capacity building on issues including gender equality in the National Assembly, promoting equality more broadly, and improving women’s resilience. Public awareness campaigns in communities can address traditional practices that discriminate against women. Another priority is providing training for relevant actors in the justice system on issues of particular relevance to GBV (Outcome 2 of the NPAGE).³⁶⁴ The NPAGE also supports gender mainstreaming throughout all sectors, as part of implementing the Gender Equality Law: Output 3.1 sets a target of 80 percent of all sectors integrating gender equality into their work. The NPAGE also includes targets for strengthening the organizational structure of the NCAWMC and the capacity of its staff (Outcomes 4.1 and 4.2), in keeping with the Gender Equality Law (Articles 35–40). For effective implementation of the NPAGE, the NCAWMC will need to conduct assessments and develop more detailed action plans for each set of targets, while establishing processes for receiving and responding to complaints and grievances. Key informants indicated that cultural acceptance, language barriers of local dialects, and lack of enforcement at the village level have been significant factors hindering the success of National Action Plan initiatives.³⁶⁵

6.2.2 LEGAL AID

Laos PDR established equal rights for men and women in the 1991 Constitution (Articles 22 and 24) and affirmed them in the 2003 and 2015 revisions. The current Constitution states that women and men possess equal political, sociocultural, and familial rights, and it supports the development of the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) to provide for the rights of women, including family, property, land, labor, and penal and electoral law.³⁶⁶ In 2004, the Law on the Development and Protection of Women and Children was ratified, establishing the responsibilities of the state, family, and society in the protection of women, the eradication of discrimination against women, and the effort to eliminate trafficking and domestic violence against women and children,³⁶⁷ and establishing the goal of creating a climate supporting women’s involvement in national defense and development.³⁶⁸ Decree no. 77 which covers legal aid also guarantees protection and legal aid to victims of violence and other disadvantaged

³⁶⁴ Government of Lao PDR. 2021. *National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021-2025)*. [Unofficial Translation]. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

³⁶⁵ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁶⁶ World Bank and ADB. 2012. *Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR*.

³⁶⁷ Government of Lao PDR. 2004. *Law on the Development and Protection of Women and Children*.

³⁶⁸ Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

groups;³⁶⁹ Article 30 of Decree no. 562 on Law Dissemination identifies victims (i.e., survivors) of domestic violence and human trafficking as the main target group for disseminating information about legal rights and remedies or services.³⁷⁰

Lao PDR has two key laws for addressing GBV: the 2014 Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children³⁷¹ and the 2004 Law on Women's Development and Protection.³⁷² The 2014 law states that no custom, tradition, or belief can justify GBV; it highlights the multifaceted nature of violent acts (physical, sexual, psychological, and economic), citing polygamy and unequal wages as forms of psychological and economic violence against women (VAW).³⁷³ Both Article 50 of the 2004 Law and Article 47 of the 2014 law note that mediation can be used if the violence "does not cause much harm," stipulating that judicial proceedings should be used only when "the violence is serious." However, determining "harm" or "violence" can be highly subjective, and this standard in effect legitimizes some level of VAW.³⁷⁴ These provisions contravene CEDAW General Recommendations Numbers 33 and 35, which state that cases of VAW should not be referred to alternative dispute resolution procedures, as this can impede women's access to justice through the court system.³⁷⁵

Despite extensive legal validation of women's rights, the actual enforcement as well as social awareness of this legislature remains poor. The limited availability of legal aid to assist citizens in claiming their rights leads to over-reliance on local institutions, which tend to follow traditional gender norms and customs.³⁷⁶ Key informants stated that both men and women have low access to formal legal aid in Lao PDR, and they can typically access justice only through local institutions that apply customary law, which are generally comprised almost entirely of men.³⁷⁷ The influence of cultural norms on local legal rulings has raised questions about whether women can achieve justice or protection at the village level due to gender bias, not only voiced in the media but also by agencies such as police, courts, and village authorities.³⁷⁸ In addition, customary law is not formally transmitted; rather, the diverse customary practices of Lao ethnic groups, relating to traditional land and gender role relationships, are reproduced orally, leading to a kind of legal illiteracy among many citizens.³⁷⁹

These conditions have generated questions as to whether village-based justice is able to provide adequate protection for women without being influenced by strong cultural gender biases. To address

³⁶⁹ Government of Lao PDR. 2018. *Decree no. 77 on Legal Aid*.

³⁷⁰ Government of Lao PDR. 2020. *Decree no. 562 on Law Dissemination*.

³⁷¹ Government of Lao PDR. 2014. *Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children 2014*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

³⁷² Government of Lao PDR. 2004. *Law on Development and Protection of Women 2004*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

³⁷³ OECD. 2021. *Social Institutions and Gender Index: SIGI 2021 Regional Report for Southeast Asia*. OECD Publishing: Paris, France.

³⁷⁴ CEDAW Committee. 2009. *Concluding Observations of The Committee on The Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: Lao People's Democratic Republic*. CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/7. Para 23.

³⁷⁵ CEDAW. 2015. *General Recommendation No. 33 on Women's Access to Justice*. CEDAW/C/GC/33 (23 July 2015). Para 58(c); and CEDAW. 2017. *General Recommendation No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence Against Women, Updating General Recommendation No. 19*. CEDAW/C/GC/35. (14 July 2017). Para 45.

³⁷⁶ Lao Women's Union. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*.

³⁷⁷ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁷⁸ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁷⁹ Lao Women's Union. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*.

these inadequacies, the Lao Government prepared a Legal Sector Master Plan (LSMP), which established Village Mediation Units (VMU) to provide culturally appropriate places for local conflict management.³⁸⁰ Key informants note that VMUs are not gender-sensitive and provide little representation for women: there is reportedly only one village LWU representative position open for women.³⁸¹ The topics delegated to this role are primarily family issues, further emphasizing the limited involvement of women.³⁸² Key informants corroborated that widespread factors, such as illiteracy, limited Lao language ability or legal understanding, and limited ability to travel, compel the use of local resolution and village or customary-based justice.³⁸³ An additional likely barrier is access to financial resources to procure legal services (or to travel to where legal services are offered). Moreover, marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ persons, and persons with disabilities have limited access to legal knowledge and justice beyond the village level (such as formal litigation, mediation, and arbitration), because few legal professionals serve these populations.³⁸⁴ This reinforces the need, cited by key informants, for increasing government knowledge of LGBTQI+ issues and need for legal aid.³⁸⁵

“Expansion of legal aid is critical to reach rural communities and ensure social inclusion measures and practices are in place for access to persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBTQI persons.”

– Key Informant

Access to legal aid is also constrained by language skills for most marginalized groups, as cited by several key informants.³⁸⁶ Because Lao-Tai language is primarily used by government officials, women and minorities who primarily speak other languages experience a linguistic barrier to legal understanding. This is exacerbated by using “government jargon,” with which even native speakers of Lao can struggle.³⁸⁷

Key informants also detailed that legal services providers are found mainly in urban areas, disadvantaging rural communities, especially poor people and ethnic minority groups who tend to live in remote areas.³⁸⁸ In fact, most lawyers are based in the Vientiane Capital. Additionally, there are very few women lawyers: only 72 of 321 lawyers in Laos are female, serving a population of seven million.³⁸⁹ This gender gap compounds the regional and socioeconomic disparities in access to legal aid across the country.³⁹⁰ As key informants noted, this gap is exacerbated by a lack of role models for women in leadership positions; societal norms that devalue higher education for women contribute to the lack of female lawyers.³⁹¹ The low proportion of female lawyers also impacts women’s access to

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁸² The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support*.

³⁸³ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁸⁴ USAID Laos. 2021. *USAID Legal Aid Support*. ([Link](#))

³⁸⁵ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁸⁶ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁸⁷ The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support*.

³⁸⁸ Key stakeholder interviews; and Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support*.

³⁸⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁹⁰ The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support*.

³⁹¹ Key stakeholder interviews.

aid, as traveling alone to meet primarily male legal aid staff is often not socially acceptable for women, particularly in rural communities.

The 2015 Public Justice Survey demonstrated several critical gender gaps in Oudomxay, Xieng Khouang, and Champasak. As corroborated by key informant interviews, people with low education have the least information about how to submit grievance claims.³⁹² Low socioeconomic status and remote location are correlated with the lowest scores on legal knowledge and confidence in self-protection and legal rights. In other findings, men scored 10–30 percent higher than women in knowledge of formal legal infrastructure and the location of institutions; only 25 percent of rural citizens are aware of their legal institutions' locations; and individuals' preferred medium of information dissemination varies, with women preferring TV programming and men preferring other official channels of information.³⁹³ The survey data corroborates gender inequality, socioeconomic status, and location as factors contributing to legal aid disparities in Lao PDR.

Key informants also explained that persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by distance to access legal aid.³⁹⁴ Mobile clinics could address this critical need by making legal aid accessible. Some mobile clinics for legal aid are being implemented by Association for Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) and The Asia Foundation, with funding support from USAID, the EU, and Helvetas. However, these efforts are hampered by a lack of experienced lawyers and insufficient funding. Expanding free legal aid clinics should be considered, using existing sites as data collection points to inform future initiatives regarding the gaps in aid access. Further legal access issues include a lack of support for those who speak sign language, lack of transportation, physical barriers (e.g., stairs), and lack of awareness of rights.

Lao PDR's Family Law does not prohibit underage marriages, and under customary or traditional law there is no formal registration requirement.^{395, 396} **While 18 is the minimum legal age for marriage, parental consent can bypass this law; 35 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, and an additional 9 percent are married prior before age 15, especially common among poorer households and in rural locations.**³⁹⁷ The Mon-Khmer and Hmong people have the highest percentages of teenage marriages, at 31 percent and 35 percent respectively—likely attributable to the custom of “bride price,” which requires the groom's family to pay a sum to the bride's family at marriage. In extreme cases, poor families perceive daughters as economic capital, available for trade through marriage.

Legal protection against GBV has significant limitations. Physical violence is understood to mean serious injury or damage; clear consent is not specified; and the burden of proof remains on the victim. Despite the criminalization of rape, forced sex in marriage is not categorized as rape but as a lesser offense. Moreover, victims of rape or domestic violence have no direct path to court; they are required to first

³⁹² Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁹³ The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support*.

³⁹⁴ Key stakeholder interviews.

³⁹⁵ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2016. *Results of the 4th Population and Housing Census (PHC)*. Vientiane: Lao Statistics Bureau.

³⁹⁶ The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support*.

³⁹⁷ United States Department of State. 2018. *Laos 2018 Human Rights Report*.

undergo mediated dispute resolution procedures, counter to the recommendations of the CEDAW.³⁹⁸ Key informants explained that it is difficult to discuss GBV issues because of a lack of understanding of GBV, the tendency to rely on cultural norms that view GBV as a private or internal household matter, and, in some cases, limited trust between local people and officials.³⁹⁹ VMU officials have only limited training from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), leading to issues in resolving formal legal problems. This is further exacerbated by a mostly male police force; key informants cited the need for female officers and gender-responsive training programs.⁴⁰⁰

Recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have also affected legal services in Lao. The impacts of quarantine have heightened household responsibilities and livelihood stressors. Key informants shared the observation that more women are looking for legal support.⁴⁰¹ Given that socioeconomic and household stress are correlated with domestic violence, this observation could indicate an increase in VAW, which key informants recommended should be assessed in more detail.⁴⁰² The LWU has VAW counseling centers in Vientiane Capital and in some major provinces which provide services for GBV survivors. However, most areas remain underserved, and there are no mobile services available in remote or rural areas.

6.2.3 COUNTERING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Trafficking in persons (TIP) is a major concern for Lao PDR, as many Lao nationals experience labor and sexual exploitation in neighboring countries, especially Thailand. Under the guise of labor migration, in their search for better employment, many citizens are made vulnerable to trafficking schemes. Lao migrants may fall prey to abuse in the garment industry, sex trade, domestic work, or agricultural and fishing industries—especially male migrants, who represent the majority of people subject to labor trafficking.

Forced labor and commercial sex human trafficking between Lao and Thailand also impacts women, girls, men, and boys in Lao.⁴⁰³ Trafficking to South Korea and China for forced marriage and sexual exploitation is also a leading issue.⁴⁰⁴ Another form of trafficking begins with migration schemes in which illegitimate brokers charge fees to assist migrants, who are instead trafficked. These schemes are exacerbated by inadequate district-level immigration infrastructure and open borders, which create easy transit points.⁴⁰⁵ Key informant interviews indicated that women and children are the primary victims of Trafficking in Persons (TIP), other than labor trafficking (which affects more men than women).⁴⁰⁶ Factors that contribute to TIP include gender norms that inhibit access to education, information, paid

³⁹⁸ The Asia Foundation. 2019. *Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis (GSIA) USAID Laos Legal Aid Support Program*.

³⁹⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Key stakeholder interviews; and Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*.

⁴⁰³ US Department of State. 2021. *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

⁴⁰⁴ United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT). 2021. *Lao PDR*.

⁴⁰⁵ US Department of State. 2021. *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

⁴⁰⁶ Key stakeholder interviews.

employment, and public health services. Language barriers make information and aid access more difficult as well, as women may not understand the vulnerabilities and risks relating to TIP.

Key informant interviews confirm that, though the phenomenon of brokers is well known, knowledge is lacking of how they function in trafficking patterns between Lao PDR and Thailand.⁴⁰⁷ Existing data seems to support that the initial driver is voluntary migration due to a desire for improved economic conditions, rather than coercion or abuse. Seeking better employment and socioeconomic status, Lao migrants must cross at either the formal or informal border checkpoints between Lao PDR and neighboring countries, where they are vulnerable to broker schemes.⁴⁰⁸ **Key informants report that safe migration awareness campaigns are needed, especially in rural communities, to promote understanding of migration paperwork and official migration channels.**⁴⁰⁹ Short-term training was also suggested, to increase awareness among men and women prior to migration about trafficking concerns. Both the LWU and Lao Youth Union (LYU) were mentioned as good resources for outreach in rural areas to support anti-trafficking efforts.

Another type of broker that facilitates human trafficking is a marriage broker. Families in rural areas may face land tenure issues and food insecurity, with limited income or other financial support. Unable to compete with commercialized agriculture, such families are susceptible to marriage offers.⁴¹⁰ These common stressors are exacerbated by disabilities, by language barriers that limit women's and children's understanding of what is discussed with the broker, and by cultural customs that favor marriage as a means of family survival;⁴¹¹ the last point pertains especially to the Akha (Sino-Tibetan) and Khmu (Mon-Khmer) cultures.⁴¹² Manipulating these vulnerabilities, unscrupulous brokers induce potential "brides" into sex and labor trafficking schemes.⁴¹³

Key informants indicate that WEE is important for mitigating TIP. They propose offering vocational training in communities vulnerable to trafficking, such as high-poverty rural areas, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons.⁴¹⁴ Training should incorporate financial literacy, life skills, and legal information to increase understanding about different forms of TIP and promote gender equality. This would complement the government's national development plan, which includes disseminating information in secondary schools to raise awareness of trafficking. It would also help prepare young people (both men and women) to recognize the danger signs of TIP when recruited to work and while working in other countries.

To reduce human trafficking, the GOL has instituted legislation to facilitate prosecution and to protect vulnerable parties. This includes laws on: Anti-Human Trafficking (introduced in 2015, to align Lao PDR's classification of trafficking with international definitions); the Development and Protection of Women;

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT). 2021. *Lao PDR*.

⁴⁰⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴¹⁰ FAO. 2018. *Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Lao PDR*.

⁴¹¹ Winrock International. 2020. *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis USAID Laos Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) Project*.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ US Department of State. 2021. *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

⁴¹⁴ Key stakeholder interviews.

and Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children.⁴¹⁵ Lao PDR has also prepared national plans and programs to prevent trafficking, such as the 2016–2020 National Plan of Action on the Prevention and Counter of Human Trafficking,⁴¹⁶ which made provisions for safe shelters, legal aid, victims' education, medical services, and reintegration into society. The Ministry of Public Security has developed the third National Action Plan (2021–2025) of the NS/ATD. However, key informants shared it is not clear that the plan is gender-sensitive, and it should be explored further.⁴¹⁷ They also corroborate that the diverse needs of vulnerable populations have not been met with current anti-trafficking legislation.⁴¹⁸

The centralized identification system for victims, as well as inadequate communication between regional and Vientiane Capital legal institutions, create obstacles in referral protocols.⁴¹⁹ The central NS/ATD is the only institution capable of formally identifying instances of trafficking; at the regional level, there are no other institutions or agencies with the ability to screen and support trafficking victims. Key informants suggest that improvements could be made to allow others—such as the LWU, immigration police, regional law enforcement, and village authorities—to identify victims and refer them for legal support.⁴²⁰

However, the GOL is making efforts to counter trafficking with both existing and new programs, such as the NS/ATD's third National Action Plan and the ongoing work of the National Steering Committee on Anti-Human Trafficking. The government has also advocated for provincial and district level involvement, most clearly in the Prime Minister's 2018 decree on national committee implementation of anti-trafficking legislation. However, as stated by key informants, more support is needed to ensure gender and social inclusion in legal mechanisms for all trafficking victims, including male trafficking victims who currently do not benefit as much from legal assistance and protective services as women and children.⁴²¹

Lao PDR has not effectively addressed underlying factors that contribute to human trafficking, including limited employment opportunities and increased immigration of foreign workers, social disparities between provinces, inequalities between rural and urban areas, and drug abuse.⁴²² Programs and legislation do not adequately address these issues, with scant employment protections, poor quality education, and limited health services. Comprehensive approaches to reducing poverty and spurring rural development are needed, including improvements in the education system and vocational training

⁴¹⁵ Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

⁴¹⁶ Ministry of Public Security, Secretariat of Anti-Human Trafficking, National Committee Anti Trafficking in Person. 2017. *National Plan on Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking (2017- 2020)*.

⁴¹⁷ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴¹⁸ Winrock International. 2020. *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis USAID Laos Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) Project*. USAID.

⁴¹⁹ US Department of State. 2021. *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

⁴²⁰ Key stakeholder interviews; and US Department of State. 2021. *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

⁴²¹ Key stakeholder interviews; Winrock International. 2020. *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis USAID Laos Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) Project*. USAID.

⁴²² Key stakeholder interviews.

to better prepare youth for the workforce, and equitable allocations of funding and resources for rural and remote areas.⁴²³

6.2.4 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

The 2014 National Survey on Violence Against Women⁴²⁴ reports that 30.3 percent of women have experienced one or more types of partner violence, including physical, sexual, or emotional violence, with emotional violence being the most common. Although often missed or underestimated, 26.2 percent of women experience emotional abuse in their lifetime (28.6 percent in rural areas without road access).⁴²⁵ Furthermore, 5.3 percent of women have experienced non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (age 15 and older). Young women are particularly vulnerable to GBV, with a prevalence rate of 12.9 percent among 15 to 19-year-olds, compared with 4.6 percent and 7.8 percent among 50-year-old or 60-year-old women.⁴²⁶ **Key informants emphasize that more reliable data are needed to develop and support initiatives for mitigating and effectively responding to GBV, and that a new National Survey on Violence Against Women should be conducted.**⁴²⁷

As verified by key informants, most abuse is not reported due to cultural beliefs among women and men that domestic violence is not subject to public purview.⁴²⁸ If they do seek help, many women will look for resolution within their family first, or their village, before contacting authorities. The traditional resolution process seeks to restore family balance rather than ensure restitution or protection for women.⁴²⁹ Moreover, some women are precluded from making a claim themselves; certain ethnic communities require that such claims must be presented by a male family member to the VMU. In these communities, women are often wary of making claims in any case, as they can lose credibility and respect in their community.⁴³⁰

“Social stigma of reporting GBV discourages many women from doing so, as they may be ostracized from their community. There is a need for greater awareness of the risks of GBV and the negative impact on the family, community, and society overall. Men must be engaged at all levels of discourse and action.”

– Key Informant

The National Plan of Action on Protection and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children (2021–2025) aims to develop a coherent multisectoral approach to preventing and addressing GBV. The

⁴²³ Government of Lao People’s Democratic Republic. 2021. *The Five-Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021-2025)*. (Approved by the inaugural session of the Ninth National Assembly on 22-26 March 2021 in accordance with the Resolution No. 20/NA, dated 26 March 2021).

⁴²⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau, NCAW, UNFPA, UN Women, and WHO. 2014. *Summary Report A Study on Violence against Women in Lao PDR; Lao National Survey on Women’s Health and Life Experiences 2014*.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴²⁸ Key stakeholder interviews; and Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

⁴²⁹ Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

⁴³⁰ Lao Statistics Bureau, NCAW, UNFPA, UN Women, and WHO. 2014. *Summary Report A Study on Violence against Women in Lao PDR; Lao National Survey on Women’s Health and Life Experiences 2014*.

Plan specifies that the NCAWMC is responsible for monitoring and evaluating implementation, including collecting data on the experiences of survivors of GBV. While this is a promising step forward, it is important to make certain that data are disaggregated and that information is effectively collected in an ethical and sensitive manner, as outlined in the UNFPA Minimum Initial Standards Package Standard 4.⁴³¹ Moreover, in finalizing the National Plan of Action, the GOL should align with CEDAW recommendations, including developing and implementing the plan through a participatory and inclusive process, and providing capacity-building programs to ensure that all cases of gender-based violence are investigated and prosecuted in a gender-sensitive manner.⁴³² The Khan Hom Project is working toward the prevention and elimination of violence against women and mainstreaming gender into Lao PDR's national development agenda.⁴³³ This project is supported by UNFPA for the health and social sectors, and by UNDP for the police and justice sectors. It aims to establish a coordinated and expanded GBV prevention and response system, with clear referral pathways across sectors, organizations, and government entities. In addition, the project is working with the NCAWMC and LWU, providing training on the Essential Service Package and setting national guidelines or SOPs for prevention and response to GBV within the police, justice, health, and social sectors. These activities offer opportunities for collaboration in addressing GBV.

Together, the NCAWMC and LWU support the implementation of legal protection for women, specifically through sub-CAW units that coordinate village-, provincial-, and district-level policies and implementation. The second National Strategy on the Advancement of Women was created through the efforts of the NCAWMC in 2011–2015 to comply with international agreements and facilitate gender equality in law, programs, and policies. The NCAW has also been responsible for sectoral data collection, coordinating reporting and monitoring efforts, and delineating the specific responsibilities of government officials in mitigating violence against women and girls. However, lack of funding has stalled some of these efforts.

Recently, the government and Prime Minister ratified the Second National Plan of Action (2021–2025) on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Violence against Children (NPAVAWVAC). The NCAWMC was responsible for developing this legislature; UNFPA provided technical support; and Care International, ILO, UN Women, and UNFPA provided financial support.⁴³⁴ Sub-CAW units assist with translating the NAPVAWC into specific plans to realize gender equality across sectors, organizations, and local authorities.⁴³⁵ UNDP is conducting the institutional capacity needs assessment of VAW and will provide technical as well as some financial assistance for translating the NAPVAWC into plans in the legal sector, including the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Public

⁴³¹ UNFPA. 2015. UNFPA Minimum Standards for Prevention and Response to Gender Based Violence in Emergencies. New York.

⁴³² CEDAW Committee. 2018. Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/8-9 (14 November 2018) Paras 24 and 26.

⁴³³ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴³⁴ UNFPA Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2021. Lao PDR Agrees to Endorse Five-Year Plans To Advance Women's Right and Gender Equality. ([Link](#))

⁴³⁵ Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

Security, People Supreme Court, and Supreme People's Prosecutor.⁴³⁶ This will be a good area to explore for collaboration.

As shared by key informants, COVID-19 conditions have aggravated pre-existing gender inequalities in Lao PDR.⁴³⁷ The precautionary lockdowns and quarantines to prevent COVID-19 from spreading directly correlate with increases in GBV, including sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and early marriages and pregnancies, leaving many women without recourse to escape their abusers or to secure help.⁴³⁸ For instance, the LWU's survey efforts have revealed an increase in child sex abuse, rape, and familial abuse⁴³⁹ following the COVID-19 lockdown protocols; and the UN's household survey reports that 5.3 percent of men and 4.4 percent of women recounted increased experiences of GBV in their neighborhoods.⁴⁴⁰ Further research has documented that most calls to hotline counselors involved claims by married women of physical and emotional abuse following conflicts about family income.⁴⁴¹ More investigation is needed to measure the extent, impact, and triggers of increased GBV.⁴⁴²

Lao PDR has the highest rate of child marriage in the region and the highest adolescent birth rates in South East Asia.⁴⁴³ Although marriage before 18 years of age is prohibited by Family Law, 23.5 percent of women aged 15–19 years were in a marriage or union, and 32.8 percent of women aged 20–49 years were married before the age of 18.⁴⁴⁴ **As shared by key informants, factors related to early marriage include high levels of poverty and low levels of education of adolescent girls and parents.⁴⁴⁵ Child marriages are also more frequent in remote and Hmong-Mien headed households, where a bride's family is provided with labor and economic support or dowry.⁴⁴⁶ More effective measures are needed to prevent early marriage, including social and behavioral change communication and information campaigns in local dialects, enforcement of penalties by District Authorities, and engagement with community leaders. **Girls who marry before the age of 18 are at a higher risk of exposure to violence due to lack of status, power, and decision making in the household; they are more likely to be physically and/or emotionally abused by husbands or in-laws.**⁴⁴⁷ Early marriage is also correlated with adolescent pregnancy, school dropout, and lower rates of labor force participation as adults. These have detrimental lifelong and**

⁴³⁶ UNDP. 2020. "Project on Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women for Mainstreaming Gender into the National Development Agenda in Lao PDR."

⁴³⁷ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴³⁸ UNDP Lao PDR. 2020. "Project on Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women for Mainstreaming Gender into the National Development Agenda in Lao PDR."

⁴³⁹ MPI. 2021. *Impact of COVID-19: Reimagining Gender*. Vientiane and UNICEF Lao PDR.

⁴⁴⁰ UNICEF Lao PDR. 2021. *Impact of COVID-19: Safeguarding Women's Health and Entrepreneurship*. Vientiane and UNICEF.

⁴⁴¹ Korean International Cooperation Agency, UNFPA, and UNDP. 2021. *Ending Violence Against Women and Mainstreaming Gender into the National Development Agenda in Lao PDR*.

⁴⁴² Social Impact. 2021. *USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment*.

⁴⁴³ OECD. 2021. *Social Institutions and Gender Index: SIGI 2021 Regional Report for Southeast Asia*. OECD Publishing: Paris, France.

⁴⁴⁴ Lao PDR. 2018. *Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS) 2017*.

⁴⁴⁵ Key stakeholder interviews.

⁴⁴⁶ Key stakeholder interviews; and Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

⁴⁴⁷ Lao PDR World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Gender-Based Violence Institutional Mapping Report*.

intergenerational consequences on health, nutrition, fertility rates, GBV, employment, and women's empowerment and economic agency.

Despite legislative and grassroots efforts in Lao PDR, GBV is underreported and is exacerbated by ethnic customs, social stigma, and cultural definitions of violence and rape.⁴⁴⁸ The local-level support mechanisms, such as the VMUs, do not provide adequate support for the victims in achieving justice or restitution. Officials in government, law enforcement, public health, and VMU generally lack knowledge and training on how to identify and address GBV. When victims do seek assistance, the number of shelters in rural or remote areas is insufficient. Moreover, the burden of proof for convicting a perpetrator is high, and authorities have limited information about prosecutions to inform future cases or facilitate successful outcomes for victims. Key informants indicate that counseling, psychosocial support, and vocational training are needed to support GBV survivors, especially in rural communities.⁴⁴⁹

6.3 ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

Below are 2021 U.S. Government standard foreign assistance (F) indicators that USAID/Laos may consider for use in monitoring, evaluation, and learning in this sector.

TABLE 9. DRG: KEY ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS BY KEY ISSUE

KEY ISSUE	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
Leadership and Representation	<p>DR.4-1 Number of USG-supported activities designed to promote or strengthen the civic participation of women</p> <p>DR.4.2-2 Number of civil society organizations (CSOs) receiving USG assistance engaged in advocacy interventions</p>
Legal Aid	<p>DR.6.3-1 Number of individuals from low-income or marginalized communities who received legal aid or victim's assistance with USG support (see reference sheet for important guidance)</p> <p>GNDR-9 Number of training and capacity-building activities conducted with USG assistance that are designed to promote the participation of women or the integration of gender perspectives in security sector institutions or activities</p>
GBV	<p>GNDR-6 Number of people reached by a USG-funded intervention providing GBV services (e.g., health, legal, psycho-social counseling, shelters, hotlines), disaggregated by sex</p>
Human Trafficking	<p>PS.5.1-27 Number of survivors of human trafficking who have gained sustainable livelihoods through U.S. State Department and USAID foreign assistance, disaggregated by sex (and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>PS.5.2-22 Number of police, border patrols, prosecutors, judges, and social workers trained on the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases, disaggregated by sex</p> <p>PS.5.3-15 Number of people trained in the prevention of human trafficking, disaggregated by sex</p>

⁴⁴⁸ Key stakeholder interviews; and CEDAW Committee. 2018. Concluding Observations: Lao PDR, CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/8-9.

⁴⁴⁹ Key stakeholder interviews.

7 ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT: FINDINGS, EVIDENCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TABLE 10. SNAPSHOT OF RELEVANT STATISTICS

- Females are underrepresented in STEM education attainment (12.79 percent, compared to 32.47 percent for males).⁴⁵⁰
- 91 percent of the population uses solid biomass for cooking and heating, the bulk of which is collected by women.⁴⁵¹
- 24 percent of Ministry of Energy and Mines staff are female (at central, provincial, and district offices).⁴⁵²
- 35 percent of Ministry of Energy and Mines staff in Vientiane Capital are female, six of whom are in senior decision-making positions.⁴⁵³
- Up to 39 percent of rural family income is derived from non-timber forest products (NTFPs), most of which are collected by women, amounting to about \$489 per year for subsistence consumption and \$204 per year for cash income.⁴⁵⁴
- Environmental risk factors constitute 26 percent of the disease burden of Lao PDR, which impacts women more as the primary caregivers of the sick.⁴⁵⁵

7.1 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings and recommendations are presented below by subsector, in order of priority based on issues identified by key informants and stakeholders and in key reports from the literature review.

7.1.1 ENGENDERING ENERGY

The **Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) Gender Strategy seeks to increase women’s employment and leadership in the energy sector, although the mechanisms and objectives for doing so remain unclear.** The MEM GESI Analysis identifies weaknesses that affect the ministry’s ability to implement the 2021–2025 GESI Strategy Five-Year Development Plan: a lack of capacity to plan, budget, implement tasks, or monitor and evaluate gender impacts in activities and achievements; lack of an enforcement mechanism; and lack of clarity about gender equality, including among gender focal points.

- Support implementation of MEM 2021-2025 GESI Strategy Five-Year Development Plan:
 - Improve management and information systems, including monitoring and evaluation with collection of disaggregated data (by gender and ethnic group).

⁴⁵⁰ World Economic Forum. 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report. March 2021 Insight Report*. Geneva, Switzerland. ([Link](#))

⁴⁵¹ World Bank. 2019. *Lao PDR Clean Cook Stove Initiative (PI69538)*. Project Information Document (PID). Appraisal Stage.

⁴⁵² Laos Energy Security Project. 2021 (draft). *Gender Analysis Report*.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Foppes, J., and D. Samontri. 2010. *Assessment of the Values of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) in Lao PDR. Technical Report*. Sustainable Forestry and Rural Development (SUFORD) Project. MAF/DOF.

⁴⁵⁵ UNICEF. 2019. *The Situation of Children and Women: Lao People’s Democratic Republic*. Vientiane.

- Offer training to improve clarity about gender equality and the business case benefits (economic logic) of gender inclusion within the energy sector, including MEM and state-owned utilities as well as the private sector.
- Support skills-building training for women working in MEM, Electricite du Laos (EDL, the national utility company), and independent power producers (IPPs), including components on confidence building, negotiation skills, use of technical English language, and personal initiative.

Gender stereotypes, coupled with occupational segmentation, limit the choice of study subjects and career paths for girls and women, who remain underrepresented in the energy sector and in management and decision-making positions.

- Provide scholarships and targeted training for young women and under-represented ethnic groups to pursue STEM subjects for study in high school and university.
- Conduct market assessment of energy sector workforce needs and priorities, based on existing and future skills gaps, including opportunities in low-carbon, renewable energy, and green growth.
- Partner with public and private utilities to co-design gender equality initiatives in company policies, following the example of USAID's Engendering Industries Program:
 - Support diversity in human resources recruitment, hiring, promotions, and retention.
 - Institute leadership development and mentoring.
 - Highlight female role models in the workforce and male gender champions.
 - Provide support for establishing family-friendly and gender-equitable workplace policies.
 - Establish and publicize within workplaces transparent, confidential, and accessible grievance and dispute resolution mechanisms, including for sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Gender equality in energy requires understanding both supply and demand constraints to increasing employment opportunities and reducing occupational segmentation. Potential areas for job growth should be explored across energy services—e.g., access and maintenance, service quality, tariffs and regulations, accounting, monitoring and evaluation, reporting, and financial performance.

- Assess energy employment opportunities, to better tailor training and support in promising areas for employment and job creation across energy sector services.
- Inform activities and interventions based on an examination of demand and supply side constraints in the energy sector.

7.1.2 NATURAL RESOURCES AUTONOMY

Environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) do not always carefully assess impacts, especially pertaining to livelihoods restoration, resettlement, inclusive consultations, and potential FPIC triggers (obligating Free, Prior, and Informed Consent), in compliance with ILO Convention 169. Hydropower dams are widely understood to cause severe environmental and social impacts, but run-of-river hydropower projects have also had negative effects on biodiversity, fish stocks, and edible aquatic plants. These projects can negatively affect food security and incomes, especially for women, who tend to rely more heavily on diverse natural resources.

- Work with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) to strengthen GESI analysis in ESIs to mitigate hydropower impacts on local livelihoods and natural resources, including run-of-river projects.
- Review natural resources and energy-related policies to support revisions, with GESI-responsive provisions.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in hydropower has not led to gains in local employment, forgoing valuable opportunities for skills development, knowledge transfer, and income generation.

- Advocate for changes in FDI policies requiring that investors hire and employ local people (with preference given to project-affected people, especially women and minority ethnic groups) to increase opportunities for employment, skills development, and knowledge transfer.

7.2 DATA AND EVIDENCE

Lao PDR is highly dependent on natural resources and remains a largely agrarian country. The country has enjoyed high economic growth and falling rates of poverty over the last several decades, but largely at the expense of the environment. The government's informal strategy of "turning land into capital" (*nayobay han din pen theun*) has opened the door to FDI in land-based investments in hydropower, mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure, with the objective of reducing poverty and expanding socioeconomic opportunities.⁴⁵⁶ However, the impacts of these investments and the unsustainable use of natural resources has had a disproportionate impact on poorer households, ethnic minorities, and women.⁴⁵⁷

This section identifies key areas for gender inclusion in relation to energy and the environment, drawing on gender-related opportunities and constraints as highlighted by key informants and stakeholders and in the literature review and SOW. Data and evidence are presented in the following subsections: energy security (including access to energy and energy policies); engendering energy; climate change, environment, and disaster management; and natural resources autonomy.

⁴⁵⁶ Fullbrook, D. 2014. *Contract farming: What Works and What Might Work Better*. Presented at a Contract farming workshop by the Government/Development Partners Sub-Sector Working Group on Farmers and Agribusiness (SWGAB). Vientiane.

⁴⁵⁷ The Global Green Growth Institute. 2018. *Gender Inclusive Green Growth in Lao PDR*. GGGI Policy Brief, Seoul.

7.2.1 ENERGY SECURITY

Energy security focuses on providing clean, reliable, safe, and reasonably priced electricity.⁴⁵⁸ Currently about 90 percent of Lao PDR's electricity generation comes from hydropower.⁴⁵⁹ In 2020, the GOL and MEM created the first Energy Policy, to make better use of existing natural resources and to develop different sources and forms of energy generation.⁴⁶⁰ The aim is to bring energy stability to Lao PDR through a mix of energy sources and supply diversification that ensures sufficient energy for meeting public demand, including during the dry season. The 2020 Energy Policy is also aligned with national socioeconomic development goals to achieve middle to high income status and to attain the SDGs by 2030, including SDG 7: "Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all."⁴⁶¹

ACCESS TO ENERGY. Access to electricity has expanded from only about 10 percent of households in 1975 to 95 percent of households in 2020.⁴⁶² **While Lao PDR's target of achieving an overall 90-percent national electrification by 2020 has been exceeded, gaps in electrification remain for poorer households in rural and remote areas—affecting ethnic minorities and women the most.**⁴⁶³ The remaining unconnected households tend to be poor and disproportionately female-headed households (often widows and divorcees) in remote locations, and unable to afford electricity and connection fees.⁴⁶⁴

"The aim of MEM is to achieve 100 percent grid-connected energy access by 2030. Northern areas are most difficult for electricity access as these areas are not connected to the national grid, but they are connected through other countries."

— Key Informant

From 2000 to 2018, domestic distribution and the import of energy increased in tandem, with electricity consumption growing at an average rate of 14 percent per year.⁴⁶⁵ However, supply is not meeting year-round demand. Low water volumes during the dry season have prevented meeting full installation capacity, resulting in insufficient energy generation.⁴⁶⁶ Moreover, some remote border areas still import energy from neighboring countries, particularly in the north.

⁴⁵⁸ Resurrección, Bernadette P., and Michael Boyland. 2017. *Gender Equality in Renewable Energy in the Lower Mekong: Assessment and Opportunities*. USAID Clean Power Asia, Stockholm Environment Institute, and Abt Associates.

⁴⁵⁹ In 2019, Lao PDR had a total of 78 power plants, as follows: 68 hydropower plants (inclusive of small hydro with a minimum installation power of under one MW; one coal thermal power plant; five solar farms; and four renewable energy plants (sugarcane and paper). GOL. 2020. Energy Policy of Lao PDR. Vientiane (July 2020).

⁴⁶⁰ GOL. 2020. Energy Policy of Lao PDR. Vientiane (July 2020).

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Resurrección, Bernadette P., and Michael Boyland. 2017. *Gender Equality in Renewable Energy in the Lower Mekong: Assessment and Opportunities*. USAID Clean Power Asia, Stockholm Environment Institute, and Abt Associates.

⁴⁶⁴ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.

⁴⁶⁵ GOL. 2020. Energy Policy of Lao PDR. Vientiane (July 2020).

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

Electrification reduces time spent on domestic chores, which are primarily done by women and girls, while also enabling greater flexibility in the timing and organizing of tasks.⁴⁶⁷ Surveys of newly electrified rural households reveal that grid electricity saves time in collecting water and supports income-generation through (for example) the use of water pumps to irrigate vegetable gardens, lighting for working on handicrafts, and refrigeration for micro-and small businesses serving tourists.⁴⁶⁸ **Electricity extends the hours for both productive and leisure activities, and can translate into better educational outcomes, improved social and community services, and better security, particularly for women and girls.**⁴⁶⁹

ENERGY POLICIES. There are no explicit policy frameworks pertaining to gender and energy security, and most energy-related policies are not gender-responsive. Lao PDR's renewable energy policies include: the Energy Policy of Lao PDR (2020); the Electricity Law (1997, revised in 2017); the National Policy for Environmental and Social Sustainability of the Hydro Sector (2006); the Investment Promotion Law (2009); the Renewable Energy Development Strategy (2011); and the Policy on Sustainable Hydro Development (No. 2, January 2015).⁴⁷⁰ There are also some related gender-responsive instruments, such as the Law on Women's Development and Protection, Vision 2030, the 10-Year National Strategy on Gender Equality (2016–2025), Vision 2030 on Women Development, and the 10-year Women's Development Strategy (2016–2025).⁴⁷¹

While the Environmental Protection Law⁴⁷² (revised 2012) does not include gender considerations, there have been positive developments in subsidiary laws and guidelines prepared by the MONRE. The 2012 Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines introduce the use of disaggregated gender data, gender considerations in community assessment studies and consultations, and socioeconomic criteria for environmental impact assessments.⁴⁷³ While these guidelines are non-binding and do not prioritize gender considerations, they do provide sufficient guidance to underpin practices for gender assessments, inclusive consultations, and gender mainstreaming into ESAs. Nevertheless, there is evidence that these do not always carefully assess impacts, especially in relation to livelihood restoration and resettlement.

Lao PDR's 2018 National Green Growth Strategy signals a move toward a greener and more inclusive, fair, and resilient approach to economic growth, climate change, and economic uncertainties.⁴⁷⁴ The strategy identifies seven priority sectors, including natural resources and environment, agriculture and

⁴⁶⁷ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Resurrección, Bernadette P., and Michael Boyland. 2017. *Gender Equality in Renewable Energy in the Lower Mekong: Assessment and Opportunities*. USAID Clean Power Asia, Stockholm Environment Institute, and Abt Associates.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² GOL. 2012. *Environmental Protection Law*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

⁴⁷³ GOL. 2012. *Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines*. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

⁴⁷⁴ The Green Growth strategy was created to address the Resolution of the 10th Party Congress, the 2030 Vision, the 10-Year Strategy (2016-2025) and the 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020). GOL. 2018. *National Green Growth Strategy of the Lao PDR till 2030. Secretariat for Formulation of National Green Growth Strategy of the Lao PDR*. Vientiane.

forestry, and energy and mines.⁴⁷⁵ There are also four cross-cutting focus areas, including rural development and poverty reduction, and gender roles and the advancement of women. The strategy proposes increasing opportunities for women and girls in traditionally male-dominated positions within the energy sector as well as in green jobs linked to education, vocational training, skills development, and income-generating activities, especially for the poor and for ethnic minorities living in rural areas.⁴⁷⁶

7.2.2 ENGENDERING ENERGY

The energy sector is a traditionally male-dominated field.⁴⁷⁷ The Laos Energy Security Project's GESI Analysis suggests that women's share of employment in the state-owned utility company, EDL, ranged from 15 to 20 percent between 1995 and 2017. Within MEM, women hold 35 percent of positions in Vientiane Capital, though only six women are in senior decision-making positions. When provincial and district MEM offices are included, the percentage falls to 24 percent. However, there is anecdotal evidence of growing acceptance and support for women who seek to work in the energy sector, especially in MEM. This shift is likely a reflection of the efforts undertaken by MEM to support gender mainstreaming.

"Compared to the past, the number of women working in the Ministry of Energy and Mines is increasing, including female leaders. Young women are interested in working in the energy and mines sectors."

— Key Informant

Over the past several years, MEM has worked in collaboration with LWU to develop GESI guidance, including Gender Vision 2030 and two five-year GESI Strategy Plans. The Second GESI Strategy Five-Year Development Plan (2021–2025) outlines various actions and activities, including: 1) dissemination and awareness raising among all sectors about gender equality and the prevention of GBV; 2) the creation of a system for disaggregating data and improving information management and monitoring and evaluation; 3) promoting women's advancement and realization of "real" equality among men and women; and 4) improving coordination and linkages within the sector and regionally and internationally.

The MEM's GESI analysis identifies several weaknesses or areas for improvement needed to support implementation of the Second Five-Year Development Plan. It notes that MEM's Department for the Advancement of Women has been unable to effectively engage with NCAW and lacks the capacity to plan, budget, implement tasks, and monitor and evaluate activities and achievements. Existing policies and regulations developed by NCAW are not being implemented, and there is no mechanism or body to ensure enforcement. This is partly due to the limited budget of MEM's CAW, which amounts to about \$7,600 per year. Moreover, some staff (including some who oversee women's advancement) remain unclear about the department's mandate and retain biased or conservative attitudes about gender equality. This was corroborated by key informants, who highlighted the need to train gender focal points within MEM because of limited knowledge or understanding about gender integration.⁴⁷⁸ Other shortcomings

⁴⁷⁵ The other identified focus sectors are industry and commerce; public works and transport; information, culture, and tourism; and science and technology.

⁴⁷⁶ GOL. 2018. *National Green Growth Strategy of the Lao PDR till 2030*. Secretariat for Formulation of National Green Growth Strategy of the Lao PDR. Vientiane, December 2018.

⁴⁷⁷ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.

⁴⁷⁸ Key stakeholder interviews.

identified include a lack of integration of gender considerations into MEM development plans and technical skills (particularly in engineering and economics), as well as the concentration of women's employment in low-level administrative positions with limited decision-making authority.⁴⁷⁹

A 2018 World Bank study on gender equality in energy argues that both supply and demand constraints need to be addressed to enable increases in employment opportunities and reduce occupational segmentation.⁴⁸⁰ On the supply side, this means creating an equitable and enabling environment by setting targets (or quotas) in energy-related construction and maintenance jobs, establishing female-friendly facilities (such as separate toilet facilities) and employment policies (including anti-sexual harassment and grievance mechanisms), and recruiting a cadre of qualified female students and graduates in STEM subjects. On the demand side, this includes making GESI-responsive investments in vocational training, offering higher education scholarships in STEM subjects, and promoting STEM fields of study among students, parents, and educators to reorient mindsets about career opportunities for women in the energy sector. It will also likely be necessary to provide on-the-job training or internships combined with mentoring and leadership training programs. Vocational and targeted skills trainings should be informed by market assessments of energy sector workforce needs and priorities, based on existing and expected (future) skills gaps. Energy generation and use is evolving, with increasing emphasis on low carbon emissions and renewable energy. Knowledge and expertise in these areas will likely be in greater demand as Lao PDR nears its 2030 unconditional mitigation target of 60-percent GHG emission reductions (compared to baseline scenario), about 62,000 ktCO₂e.⁴⁸¹

In 2020, USAID launched Enhancing Equality in Energy for Southeast Asia (E4SEA) Activity, a regional three-year activity covering six Southeast Asian countries including Lao PDR. The aims are: 1) expand regional knowledge around gender equality and the energy sector; 2) transform attitudes; and 3) remove biases against women in the workforce. In 2022, USAID/Laos intends to sign a memorandum of agreement partnering with the Faculty of Engineering of the National University of Laos, with CORE International, for implementation of the E4SEA Activity in Lao PDR. A key focus is on creating more opportunities for women's entry and advancement in employment and leadership in the energy sector, by increasing awareness among students, parents, and educators about energy sector career options for girls, creating opportunities to advance girls and young women in STEM education and energy employment, raising awareness about constraints to gender equity and unconscious bias, and supporting the institutionalization of gender-equitable policies, norms, and interventions.

The Laos Energy Security Project focuses on supporting the GOL in achieving a resilient and financially viable power sector that contributes to green and sustainable economic growth. Its main objectives are improving energy sector planning, strengthening energy sector policies and the legal and regulatory environment, and improving the performance of the state-owned utility. The activity is also planning to focus on increasing women's participation in senior management and decision-making in the energy sector, through scholarships and training programs.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Orland, Maria Beatriz, et al. 2018. *Getting to Gender Equality in Energy Infrastructure: Lessons from Electricity Generation, Transmission, and Distribution Projects*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

⁴⁸¹ GOL. 2021. Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). Vientiane (March 2021). The term ktCO₂e is "kilotonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent."

As USAID/Laos considers potential activities and partnerships, it will be important to make the business case for gender inclusion and workforce diversity in the energy sector, focusing on MEM, EDL, and IPPs. Businesses with greater diversity in management and at operational levels perform better. Gender-inclusive hiring has been demonstrated to lead to improvements in customer service and business practices as well as more effective management and decision-making.⁴⁸² A 2018 report by McKinsey & Company highlights that companies in the top 25th percentile for gender diversity in senior management increased profitability by 21 percent, and companies with more culturally and ethnically diverse executive teams were 33 percent more likely to show better than average profits.⁴⁸³ Conversely, the report notes that companies at the bottom quartile for gender and ethnic or cultural diversity were 29 percent less likely to achieve above-average profitability. There is also evidence that employing and training women for new positions within utilities can improve customer relations, bill collection, and customer service.⁴⁸⁴

An example of a program that has effectively created gender-inclusive normative shifts in energy sector employment and policies is USAID's Engendering Industries. Launched in 2015, this program works with organizations in male-dominated industries to increase economic opportunities for women, improve gender equality, and boost business performance. It uses an employee life cycle approach—from recruitment and hiring, to onboarding, to leadership development, to planning and promotions—as a key entry point to effecting long-lasting and impactful changes for advancing gender equality and equity within partner organizations, including diversity and inclusion.⁴⁸⁵ The Activity has partnered with 41 organizations spanning 27 countries to co-design gender equality initiatives. Staff from partner organizations participate in Georgetown University's Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program and receive change management coaching after graduation, to implement, monitor, and evaluate interventions for up to three years. Based on this curriculum and the coaching support, participants craft a capstone project that identifies gender gaps and develops a strategy for addressing these gaps. This provides staff with solid best-practice human resources tools and enables them to develop context-appropriate solutions. Organizational enablers for gender equality generally include company policies and grievance management mechanisms, corporate culture and leadership models, company performance and reporting, as well as corporate communication and branding.

Recent data (2017–2020) indicate the following results from the Engendering Industries Program:⁴⁸⁶

- 6,105 female employees trained within partner organizations on technical and soft skills to advance their careers
- 2,066 female students and job seekers reached through 52 school outreach and recruitment events

⁴⁸² McKinsey & Company. 2013. Women Matter: Gender Diversity in Top Management: Moving Corporate Culture, Moving Boundaries.

⁴⁸³ Hunt, Vivian, Lareina Yee, Sara Prince, and Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle. 2018. Delivering through Diversity. McKinsey & Company. ([Link](#))

⁴⁸⁴ USAID. 2016. Engendering Utilities: Improving Gender Diversity in Power Sector Utilities. Washington, D.C.

⁴⁸⁵ USAID. 2021. Delivering Gender Equality: A Best Practices Framework for Male-Dominated Industries.

⁴⁸⁶ USAID. 2021. Engendering Industries Program Results, Project Impact by the Numbers (2017-2020): Gender Equality. ([Link](#))

- 1,115 women hired by partner organizations through 44 recruitment and hiring initiatives, with 7 percent in leadership roles and 22 percent in technical roles
- 995 women promoted, 28 percent into leadership roles and 29 percent into technical roles
- 443 gender equality best practices implemented across the employee life cycle
- 220 girls enrolled in internships and trainee programs
- 57 policies related to gender equality created at partner organizations

In the context of Lao PDR, increasing diversity within the energy sector has potential for improving gender equality and bottom-line business performance. Female role models and gender-responsive work environments and policies will help to attract and retain a gender inclusive workforce. Potential areas of work and jobs creation include: 1) access—forming new connections and maintaining existing connections; 2) service quality—standards for quality of supplies as well as customer service; 3) tariff setting and regulation—evaluation of appropriate tariff levels and structures, informed by evidence and adjusted periodically; 4) accounting and reporting—standards for collecting, compiling, evaluating, and publishing documentation/reports and information related to energy supply and distribution; and 5) financial performance—evaluation of and compliance with financial ratios, including rate of return and debt coverage.

7.2.3 CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT, AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Disaster management has worked as a critical entry-point for addressing challenges related to environmental sustainability with a high degree of public acceptance.⁴⁸⁷ According to the Climate Risk Index, Laos was the 45th most-affected country by extreme weather events in 2019 (based on fatalities and economic losses).⁴⁸⁸ Flooding has intensified in Lao PDR over the last few years, driven in part by climate change.⁴⁸⁹ Women and men experience the impacts of floods and droughts differently. Given women’s roles in the home, their responsibility for family care, and the nature of their employment, they are more likely to bear the brunt of the impacts of floods and droughts.

Most GOL laws and policies related to climate change, water, and the environment are gender-blind. There are no mechanisms for gender analysis, gender-sensitive processes for public, community and civil society participation or consultations, or gender mainstreaming in implementation. Policies and regulations are presented as “gender neutral” technical and social issues presumed to equally impact all people, with no mandates or equity mechanisms to achieve substantive gender equality.

⁴⁸⁷ UNICEF. 2019. The Situation of Children and Women: Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Vientiane.

⁴⁸⁸ UN. 2021. 2020 Progress Report Lao PDR-United Nations Partnership Framework 2017-2021: A Partnership for Sustainable Development. Vientiane.

⁴⁸⁹ The Global Green Growth Institute. 2018. Gender Inclusive Green Growth in Lao PDR. GGGI Policy Brief, Seoul.

The Climate Change Decree focuses on technical aspects of vulnerability such as hazards, rather than the impacts of climate change on defined vulnerable groups.⁴⁹⁰ The Decree does require conducting vulnerability assessments and mapping and mainstreaming that information into national and sector socioeconomic development plans and programs. This provides an avenue for identifying and addressing differential social dimensions of climate change, such as risks and coping capacities of men and women. The Climate Change Decree also promotes a participatory model of action on climate change, including the participation of women's organizations in risk assessments and in adaptation planning and implementation. However, if women are not already in formal leadership positions in relevant government organizations, they have limited opportunities to participate in decision making relating to climate change under this decree. Given that the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (NAPGE) has clear targets for women's participation and leadership in climate change, it would be worthwhile to address these questions in reviews of the Climate Change Decree and the National Climate Change Strategy currently under development.

Whether in urban or rural areas, low-income households tend to be more exposed to environmental hazards than more affluent households.⁴⁹¹ Low-income groups are more likely to live in places where they are exposed to pollution and poor sanitation, and work in industries that offer less protection from toxic substances. In Lao PDR, artisanal miners have limited knowledge of health, safety and environmental risks, and women undertake the amalgamation and mercury evaporation processes—without protective gear—in their kitchens at home.⁴⁹²

The environmental burden of disease due to climate change already constitutes 26 percent of the disease burden of Lao PDR.⁴⁹³ Women are most impacted by disease burdens in general, as the primary caregivers for the sick. A 2018 dam collapse in Lao PDR underscored the impact of floods on communities.⁴⁹⁴ Among the affected rural population, an estimated 14.2 percent suffer from disaster-related food insecurity, and 70 percent of the indebted households are forced to increase their loans to secure food and agricultural production. The floods caused an outbreak of diarrheal diseases, respiratory infections, dengue, and typhoid fever, as well as skin diseases in many of the affected regions. The event also affected some 65,000 workers in the informal sector, many of whom are most vulnerable because they lack social protection measures. Women are more likely than men to be informally employed in all provinces (except Luang Prabang), and loss of livelihoods can lead to domestic migration and thus increase the risk of being trafficked.

Indoor air pollution poses a significant health risk to women and children in Lao PDR. Illness and disease caused by smoke from cooking with biomass negatively affect women more than men, given gendered responsibilities within households.⁴⁹⁵ As much as 91 percent of the population in Lao PDR continues to use solid biomass for cooking and heating purposes.⁴⁹⁶ Given women's roles and responsibilities in the

⁴⁹⁰ GOL. 2019. Climate Change Decree.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ UNICEF. 2019. *The Situation of Children and Women: Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Vientiane, December 2019.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ World Bank. 2017. *Systematic Country Diagnostic, Lao PDR*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁴⁹⁶ World Bank. 2019. *Lao PDR Clean Cook Stove Initiative (P169538)*. Project Information Document (PID). Appraisal Stage.

household and community, they are the key stakeholders in strategies to adapt to changing environmental realities. Engaging women to switch to clean fuels for household heating and cooking can benefit family health and the environment, by reducing pressure on natural resources and lowering greenhouse gas emissions.⁴⁹⁷

7.2.4 NATURAL RESOURCE AUTONOMY

Lao PDR's natural resources and environmental endowments are threatened by practices of unsustainable extraction and overuse. Smallholder farmers depend on both forests and agriculture.⁴⁹⁸

Two-thirds of rural families rely on forests for food, fuel, fiber, and medicine, and more than 39 percent of rural family income is derived directly from Non-timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Women tend to be the primary collectors of forest products. The economic value of NTFPs to households has been estimated at \$489 per year for subsistence consumption and \$204 per year for cash income.⁴⁹⁹

Many upland peoples still practice traditional swidden or shifting cultivation. While this method of farming is sustainable when sufficient fallow period rotations are followed, this can be hard to control in practice, especially with decreasing availability of land. The government's land policy discourages shifting agriculture, citing it as one of the causes of deforestation and poverty.⁵⁰⁰

Women's land rights tend to be more at risk when land ownership and control changes occur, whether due to village relocation, elite appropriation of collective land, individual land titling of communally owned areas, lack of formal recognition of communal land and forests, or policies that facilitate land transfers to investors.⁵⁰¹ To boost agricultural production, the government has granted land concessions in the past to domestic and foreign investors for commercial purposes. This caused adverse environmental and social impacts, leading to land disputes and displacement of communities as well as the loss of forests, water sources, and biodiversity.⁵⁰² In 2013, the government suspended land concessions to evaluate their impacts. Order No. 13/PM has authorized new investments in some industrial crops, but these investments are decided on a "case by case basis" to determine what the impacts may be on the environment and livelihoods. The GOL recognizes that relying on expansion in production area is not sufficient for increasing agricultural production, and that the agriculture sector must focus on increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of use of existing natural resources to ensure optimal benefits.

Most families have access to village/community forests, designated in three categories of use: village protection forests (those around water sources and along riverbanks and roadsides), village

⁴⁹⁷ Rex, Helene Carlsson, and Sonomi Tanaka. 2012. *Country Gender Assessment for Lao PDR: Reducing Vulnerability and Increasing Opportunity*. The Asian Development Bank, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank. ([Link](#))

⁴⁹⁸ N.a. 2019. *Lao PDR Gender Integration Development Study*.

⁴⁹⁹ Foppes, J., and D. Samontri. 2010. *Assessment of the Values of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) in Lao PDR*. Technical Report. Sustainable Forestry and Rural Development (SUFORD) Project. MAF/DOF.

⁵⁰⁰ UNICEF. 2019. *The Situation of Children and Women: Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Vientiane.

⁵⁰¹ Somphongbouthakanh, Phetsakhone, and Loes Schenk-Sandbergen. 2020. *Women and Land Rights in Lao PDR: Rural Transformation and a Dream of Secure Tenure*. Land Information Working Group.

⁵⁰² Global Green Growth Institute. 2017. *Green Growth Potential Assessment – Lao PDR Country Report*.

conservation forests (spirit and cemetery forests), and village production/use forests.⁵⁰³ The latter are mainly used for timber harvesting for village infrastructure and house construction as well as collection of NTFPs for home consumption and sale, per approved management plans and village regulations.

Rural women and men often have disparate knowledge regarding forest resources as well as different roles in forest management.⁵⁰⁴ Women are mainly responsible for the collection of fuelwoods for the household and of wild plants used for food and medicine. Men are involved more in high-value activities, such as cutting and hauling timber.⁵⁰⁵ Women also use traditional agroforestry production systems such as home gardening and are involved in harvesting and selling wood and NTFPs.⁵⁰⁶

Social norms contribute to weak understanding of gender and related issues or concerns, limiting gender-responsiveness in forestry activities.⁵⁰⁷ Land use planning approaches and agricultural extension are not fully inclusive of women or vulnerable and marginalized groups. Key informants highlighted that most development-related outreach is done by men, who speak primarily with other men, including male agricultural extensionists who focus on male farmers to the exclusion of female farmers.⁵⁰⁸ Moreover, provincial, district, and national forestry agencies have limited awareness about the relevance of gender-responsive measures in their sector.⁵⁰⁹ Another factor is women’s work burdens (in home and farm), keeping them from becoming involved and from undertaking new agroforestry or forest-related livelihood opportunities.⁵¹⁰

Strengthening farming systems is critical for increasing autonomy and resilience in remote areas. The National Green Growth Strategy identifies the need to reduce vulnerability to natural disasters through economic diversification, improved forest management within conservation forest areas, and use of local nutrient cycles that can help reduce climate-induced shocks such as floods and droughts while decreasing dependency on international value chains.⁵¹¹

7.3 ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

Below are 2021 U.S. Government standard foreign assistance (F) indicators that USAID/Laos may consider for use in monitoring, evaluation, and learning in this sector.

TABLE 11. ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT: KEY ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS BY KEY ISSUE

KEY ISSUE	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
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⁵⁰³ N.a. 2019. *Lao PDR Gender Integration Development Study*.
⁵⁰⁴ LWU. 2018. *Lao PDR Gender Profile*. Vientiane.
⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.
⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.
⁵⁰⁷ World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Forest Note: Toward Sustainable Forest Landscapes for Green Growth, Jobs, and Resilience*. Washington, D.C.
⁵⁰⁸ Key stakeholder interviews.
⁵⁰⁹ World Bank. 2020. *Lao PDR Forest Note: Toward Sustainable Forest Landscapes for Green Growth, Jobs, and Resilience*. Washington, D.C.
⁵¹⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹¹ GOL. 2021. *Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)*. Vientiane (March 2021).

Energy Security	<p>CUSTOM Percentage of people trained reporting increased agreement with the concept that workplace diversity has increased</p> <p>CUSTOM Evidence of increasing or equal proportion and promotion of qualified women in senior management roles in energy-related organizations, including ministry, department, and utilities</p> <p>CUSTOM Number of female employees trained on technical and soft skills to advance their careers within the energy sector</p> <p>CUSTOM Number of female students and job seekers enrolled in internships and trainee programs within energy sector</p>
Natural Resources Autonomy	<p>EG.10.2-3 Number of people with improved economic benefits derived from sustainable natural resource management or biodiversity conservation as a result of USG assistance, disaggregated by sex (and ethno-linguistic group)</p> <p>EG.10.2-3 Number of people trained in sustainable natural resources management or biodiversity conservation as a result of USG assistance, disaggregated by sex</p>

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ANNEX B: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS, BY ADS205 DOMAIN

This annex presents findings on the gender equality context, by USAID ADS gender analysis domain, from the preliminary review of secondary data sources.

B.1 LAWS, POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

The right to gender equality and non-discrimination are set out in the Lao PDR Constitution and national legal and policy frameworks, as well as in the ratification of international conventions and treaties. The GOL has acceded to or ratified seven (out of nine) Human Rights Treaties and frameworks, including: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (ratified in 1981) and the Beijing Platform for Action (ratified in 1995); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ratified in 2009); International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ratified in 1974); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified in 2007); Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified in 1991); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified in 2009). Lao PDR has acceded to or ratified seven of the nine Human Rights Treaties and two out of four Optional Protocols. The GOL continues to harmonize national laws, policies, and programs to align with these commitments and agreements, with support from the UN and social justice and human rights groups, but implementation is lagging and required periodic reporting is overdue. Ahead of the 3rd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (January 2020) at the UN Human Rights Council, a report identified six areas for improvement in the human rights situation in Lao PDR: civic space; business and human rights; rights of indigenous peoples; women's rights; law on resettlement and vocation (August 2018); and access to justice and effective remedies.

Lao PDR's 1991 Constitution (revised 2003 and 2015) guarantees equal rights before the law irrespective of gender, social status, education, beliefs, and ethnic group in the political, economic, cultural, and social fields and in family affairs. The Law on Gender Equality, approved by the National Assembly in 2019 and promulgated by a Presidential Decree in 2020, aims to end gender-based discrimination and strengthen gender equality. The law references mainstreaming gender in all areas of work (Article 5(4), 22(3)) and includes gender-responsive provisions on overcoming cultural beliefs that inhibit women's advancement (Articles 18, 30(4) and 34). However, it does not provide for substantive equality to address inequitable outcomes among different groups, nor define and prohibit both direct and indirect discrimination according to international standards (per CEDAW).

In 2019, the GOL enacted the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In addition, Prime Ministerial Decree No. 18/1995 established a cross-ministerial body appointing the National Committee for Disabled Persons (NCDP) to act as the national focal point on disability matters and to advise the GOL on policy, programs, and service provision relating to disability. The country has a draft Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities (2021-2025). However, the Constitution and current legislation do not specifically prohibit discrimination based on disability.

Lao PDR has two key laws for addressing to GBV: the 2014 Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children, and the 2004 Law on Women's Development and Protection. The 2014 law focuses on the prevention and elimination of violence against women and children, including both domestic and public violence, in educational institutions, workplaces, and alternative care settings. This law specifies that no custom, tradition, or belief can justify this type of violence and highlights the

multifaceted nature of violent acts (physical, sexual, psychological, and economic), listing polygamy and unequal wages as forms of psychological and economic violence against women. However, both laws (2014 and 2004) support the use of mediation, even for criminal offenses. Article 50 of the 2004 Law and Article 47 of the 2014 law note that mediation or judicial proceedings can be used if the violence “does not cause much harm,” and stipulates that judicial proceedings be used only when “the violence is serious.” Determining “harm” or “violence” can be highly subjective and socially legitimizes violence against women (VAW). These provisions contravene CEDAW General Recommendations Numbers 33 and 35, which state that cases of VAW should not be referred to alternative dispute resolution procedures as this can impede women’s access to justice through the court system.

The 2016 Anti-Trafficking Law strengthens protections and assistance for survivors, including free health care. It also contains provisions for child survivors of trafficking, including their right to safely continue studies in the same or a different school or educational institution. Those who cannot continue their education must be assisted through professional or vocational training.

Women’s equal rights are stipulated in the Family, Land, and Property Laws; the Labor Law; the Electoral Law; and the Penal Law. The amended Law on Inheritance (2005) regulates inheritance of land and non-land assets. Daughters and sons have the same right to inherit, as do male and female surviving spouses (Articles 6 and 19); disinheritance of a surviving spouse, property dispossession, and inheritance grabbing are prohibited. However, discriminatory practices persist, especially among patrilineal ethnic groups and in cases of customary marriages which are unregistered.

Some laws and policies contain discriminatory provisions. The Labor Law limits women’s right to work the same hours during the night as men. Articles 96 and 97 introduce limitations related to pregnancy, barring pregnant women from certain types of jobs, and forbidding them from undertaking activities deemed hazardous or physically challenging, including working at night. Moreover, no legislation provides explicit protection against discrimination based on sexual preference or gender identity.

The Constitution provides a mandate for the Lao Women’s Union (Article 7), which was officially established in 1955, to promote and protect the rights of Laotian women and children. The National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW), Mothers and Child (NCAWMC) has sub-committees for the Advancement of Women (SubCAW). These units have been established throughout the country and across ministries and state organizations as well as at provincial and capital administrative levels, creating a broad network of gender focal points. However, seniority of experience within the government was a determining factor in the selection of SubCAWs members, and consequently most subcommittee members are male—many of whom lack understanding of gender concepts and mainstreaming.

Gender integration is also hindered by limited resources and institutional support and by competing priorities within each sector. While NGOs and civil society groups have strong potential to contribute to women’s empowerment and gender equality, there has been limited space for independent organizations. Some urban-based groups are emerging, but locally grounded organizations are few and are typically restricted to community service delivery.

Several national action plans are aimed at strengthening GESI. These include: National Action Plan for Gender Equality; the National Action Plan on Maternal and Child Health; the National Action Plan for

Protection and Elimination of Violence against Women and Children; and guidelines for involving communities to prevent and respond to violence against women and children.

The National Plan of Action on Protection and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children (2021–2025), currently in draft form, aims to develop a coherent multisectoral approach to preventing and addressing GBV. The NCAWMC will be responsible for monitoring and evaluating implementation, including collecting data on the experiences of survivors of GBV. While this is a promising step forward, such data should be disaggregated and collected in an ethical and sensitive manner, as outlined in the UNFPA Minimum Initial Standards Package Standard 4. Moreover, in finalizing the National Plan of Action, the GOL should align with recommendations made by the CEDAW. This includes developing and implementing the plan through a participatory and inclusive process, and providing capacity-building programs for judges, prosecutors, the police and other law enforcement officials, and members of village mediation units, to ensure that all cases of gender-based violence are investigated and prosecuted in a gender-sensitive manner.

National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021-2025) (NAPGE) covers a broad spectrum of gender-responsive priority activities and targets. These include: awareness-raising and capacity-building on gender equality for National Assembly members; targets to promote equality and improve women's resilience to disasters and increase the participation of women in climate change and disaster risk reduction; public awareness campaigns in communities to eradicate harmful traditional practices that discriminate against women; promoting gender equality by introducing positive measures across a broad range of activities (e.g., quotas for women in leadership roles in climate change, emergency response and disaster risk reduction); and training for actors in the justice system that are of particular relevance to GBV (Outcome 2).

The NAPGE also supports gender mainstreaming throughout all sectors as part of implementing the Gender Equality Law, with Output 3.1 targeting that 80 percent of all sectors integrate gender equality into their work. The NAPGE also includes targets for strengthening the organizational structure of the NCAWMC and capacity of its staff (Outcomes 4.1 and 4.2), which are directly linked to the Gender Equality Law (Articles 35–40). For effective implementation of the NAPGE, the NCAWMC will need to conduct assessments and develop more detailed action plans for each set of targets and establish processes for receiving and responding to complaints and grievances.

B.2 CULTURAL NORMS AND BELIEFS

Lao PDR comprises approximately 50 ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural practices and beliefs. Cultural norms, beliefs, and customary laws that are adhered to by different ethnic groups can be informed by gender bias, often resulting in negative impacts on women and girls. These cultural norms and practices affect gender roles, division of labor, marriage practices, household practices, and decision-making patterns. For example: Mon-Khmer group has a council system, comprised of older males; Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan groups follow patriarchal clan systems; and some of the Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien groups have a patrilineal system where women have limited roles in community decision-making.

Approximately 85 percent of the Lao population live in remote areas, and 47 percent of the population are considered ethnic minorities—i.e., not part of the largest ethnic group, Lao Tai. In the Hmong ethnic group, some types of marriage arrangements are traditionally controlled by men. The primary marriage

pattern among the Mon-Khmer ethnic groups is referred to as “mother’s brother’s daughter” (MBD), a form of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. A man is expected to marry his mother's brother's daughter, his matrilineal cross cousin. This practice is preferred but not enforced.

Early marriage and pregnancy rates are high in Lao PDR, especially among ethnic minorities. Child marriage rates are the highest among the remote and rural ethnic group Hmong-Mien, where the girl’s family provides economic support with a dowry. There has been a reduction in the proportion of women aged 20–49 married before the age of 18, from 37 percent to 33 percent over the period 2011–2017. However, Lao PDR continues to have the highest child marriage rate in Southeast Asia, with adolescents entering early marriage or unions when unplanned or planned pregnancies occur. Despite the reduction in adolescent pregnancies (from 94 to 83 per 1000 girls, over the period 2011–2017), the rate remains high, with considerable disparities between urban and rural areas (42 and 136 per 1000 girls, respectively). Compared to the Lao-Tai adolescent birth rate of 55 births per 1,000 women, the ethnic groups with the highest adolescent birth rates are the Hmong-Mien, with 192 births, the Sino-Tibetan, with 113, and the Mon-Khmer, with 99 per 1,000 women.

Domestic violence is considered a family matter to be resolved among relatives or members of the immediate family. Rape is considered socially unacceptable, although many ethnic groups favor marriage between the perpetrator and the survivor as a practice to restore family and community harmony. While Family Law does allow either spouse to file for a divorce, within the customary law there are different practices among the ethnic groups. In the Lolo ethnic group, daughters can choose which parent they wish to live with; however, the sons usually live with their fathers following a divorce. Among the Hmong ethnic group, it is rare for a woman to divorce due to cultural stigma and ostracism, as she would not be allowed to participate in various cultural ceremonies and practices thereafter.

Discriminatory practices, such as son preference, can result in women and girls receiving a smaller inheritance than their male relatives (or none). For example, in patrilineal ethnic groups, such as the Hmong, Khmu, Phounoy, Makong, Mien and Lolo, sons inherit the land and parental home, and the son caring for the parents until their death receives a larger share of the inheritance as well as the house. Khmu daughters are altogether excluded from inheritance if they have married and left the house, and Makong widows are also excluded from any inheritance because all rights are passed on to their children. In practice, women’s right to inheritance is also affected by the low rate of registration of customary marriages and by the rule transferring property to the eldest surviving male heir in the case of customary marriages, if the surviving spouse is a woman.

There are some cultural norms that introduce gender bias on girls’ education, especially in rural areas and among minority ethnic groups. There are expectations that girls need to take care of household chores and their siblings while parents work, and this is more important than attending school. In addition, boys receive priority to attend school if parents cannot afford to send all their children. Also, boys are given priority due to expectations they will earn income later to provide for their families.

B.3 GENDER ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND TIME USE

Within the Family Law on the Protection of Child Rights, the husband and wife have equal rights in all family matters, including a shared duty to care for and educate their children. However, there is a gendered division of labor that differs across ethnic groups and between rural and urban groups. Among most ethnic groups, men tend to control household decision making and income generation, with

women considered responsible for childcare and housework. In rural areas, men take on the duties of land cultivation and agriculture, hunting, fishing, and construction. Additionally, they are considered head of the household, and attend community meetings where they can access information and networks. Women's roles and responsibilities are largely within the care economy, including child and elder care, cooking, washing, sewing, cleaning, and collecting water and wood, though they also work in agriculture and sometimes animal husbandry.

The amount of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is five times higher for women than men. While men are engaged with some unpaid care work activities, their roles are limited due to social norms and paid work obligations. Most of the unpaid work falls on the shoulders of women. Sixty-one (61) percent of women in the labor force worked as unpaid family workers, compared to only 26 percent of men, according to the 2015 population and housing census—even though women's labor force participation is 70.8 percent versus 67.6 percent for men. To reduce women's unpaid workload is to redistribute the work; older children are taking on some of the responsibilities, especially daughters. However, there is minimal redistribution between women and men. Although there is an increase in awareness about men sharing household work, in practice there is not a significant change, especially in urban areas, where men have more opportunities for full time employment and less time to care for the household.

Promoting women in the labor force is an important component of government planning, including the GOL's 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021–2025), the 4th National Plan of Action on Gender Equality (2021–2025), and the National Strategy Plan for Gender Equality (2016–2025). However, these documents do not include any reference to women's unpaid work or unpaid care work. Thus, the plans do not speak to the importance of reducing this workload to support women's effective participation in the labor force.

In some regions, traditional attitudes about gender roles keep women and girls in subordinate positions and prevent them from equally accessing education, employment, and business opportunities. Girls are more likely to be kept at home due to safety concerns and household responsibilities, especially if the secondary school is far from home. Parents do not value education equally for girls as for boys, especially if this accords with their tradition, if the parents are poor, or if they have little or no education. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the economic and social lives of women and men. Women are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of COVID-19 in the sectors of healthcare and micro and small enterprises. In addition, job loss due to the pandemic forced many women to spend more time at home. Prior to the pandemic, women spent 4–6 hours a day on household work while men spent 30–60 minutes a day. Since the start of COVID-19, this gap in unpaid household duties has further increased for women, limiting their ability to generate income and access educational opportunities. Furthermore, COVID-19 has particularly limited the ability of girls to attend school, due to their increased household responsibilities.

B.4 ACCESS TO AND CONTROL OVER ASSETS AND RESOURCES

Access to land. Land remains a key asset and resource, central to livelihoods and food security in Lao PDR. Under the Constitution, the Land Law, and the Family Law and Property Law, women and men have equal rights to property. Access to land is regulated by the amended Land Laws (2003 and 2019). The state owns all land but may grant the right to possess, use, transfer, and allow for successive inheritance to individuals, without discrimination based on sex or marital status. Land allocations and

registration are overseen by land management authorities, who take into consideration the characteristics and size of the plot of land, and the capacity of the individual to use it.

Joint land registration and titling is authorized for married and de facto couples, but the state has the right to fine an individual who retains land without clearing it for farming or production; unused land can be transferred to other individuals without compensation. The 2019 Land Law provides no provision for joint titling of marital land, which could result in a loss of women's land rights. Moreover, the ongoing nationwide process of land mapping, registration, and titling increases the risk of eviction or expropriation without compensation, if no formal land title is held. While this applies to both women and men, women are more likely to be dispossessed of land than men, particularly among patrilineal ethnic groups. Only about one-third of the country's estimated 1.6 million registered land parcels have been titled, and a significant proportion of state land remains unmapped and not registered. Women's land rights also tend to be more at risk when land ownership and control changes occur, whether due to village relocations, elite appropriation of collective land, individual land titling of communally owned areas, lack of formal recognition of communal land and forests, or policies that facilitate land transfers to investors.

As Lao PDR transitions from an agrarian to a market economy, there is growing concern that changes in land use will undermine livelihood systems and customary rights that secure tenure, adversely affecting access to land and forest areas as well as decision-making in management and use. The 2019 Land Law does not reference communal or village ownership. Communal land is registered as state land, and while traditional users can use the land and collect resources, these rights can be revoked. Loss of communal land rights is especially impactful for women, who rely on these areas for gathering non-timber forest products and aquatic resources (from ponds and streams) to supplement household incomes and food. Access to fuelwood is also important, given that 77.2 percent of rural households and 43.8 percent of urban households rely on wood for cooking. As of 2010, among households that rely on agricultural production, 96 percent of male-headed households and 88 percent of all female-headed households had access to agricultural land; 80 percent of these female-headed households and 60 percent of these male-headed households owned or leased at least one plot of land. As of 2015, the percentage of female-headed households was only 13.1 percent.

Land rights for women and men vary across a spectrum of customary land ownership patterns and power structures (i.e., matrilineal, patrilineal, and bi-lineal) and between urban and rural locales. Women in ethnic groups with matrilineal inheritance and who live in urban and peri-urban areas tend to have a good understanding of their formal land rights. However, in rural areas, there is a lack of awareness about women's land rights, both within communities and among local government officials. Moreover, disaggregated data on issued land titles and other land documents at the provincial and district levels is mostly not available. A 2020 report cautions that women tend to lack knowledge about formal land laws and are reluctant to participate in land management meetings because of time poverty (an obstacle to women's human rights and health, and also to sustainable development), lack of confidence, and Lao language constraints. It emphasizes that safeguarding women's land rights requires a clear recognition of customary land use rights, along with the identification of communal upland agriculture areas (including upland fallows, grassland, and village-managed forests), before assessing collective, individual, or mixed ownership.

Access to infrastructure and services. Access to infrastructure and services has improved, but varies by locale. Among the 68 percent of the population residing in rural areas, 59.2 percent have road access. Government-supplied electricity reaches 87.1 percent of households, increasing to 93.1 percent of households when considering all sources of electricity, such as generators and batteries. Urban access to electricity is 99.5 percent, compared to 90.3 percent coverage in rural areas. The provinces with the lowest rates of electricity access are Luan Prabang (27.7 percent) and Saravane (17.8 percent). Electricity is used primarily for lighting, while wood and charcoal are the main sources of energy for cooking in both urban and rural areas. Luangnamtha and Vientiane have the highest use of electricity for cooking compared to other provinces, but their percentages are still very low, at 8.7 and 7.2 respectively. Women are primarily responsible for gathering or procuring fuelwood.

Access to water, sanitation, and hygiene. Access to WASH resources again depends on locality. Most households have access to basic services, including drinking water and electricity. Just over two-thirds (65.2 percent) have access to improved sources of drinking water, including 90 percent in urban areas and 53 percent in rural areas. Drinking water access is particularly low among households in Huapanh (18 percent) and Phongsaly (18.8 percent). People living in remote or poorer areas have the most difficulty accessing WASH services, and the burden of water collection generally falls heavily on women and girls. Nearly three-quarters of households (72 percent) have a flush or pour flush toilet: 90.3 percent in urban and 64.4 percent in rural areas. However, nearly one-third (29.5 percent) of households in rural areas report having no toilet, with the lack of toilet facilities particularly acute in Saravane (74.9 percent), Sekong (40.9 percent), and Attapeu (38.2 percent).

Access to finance. Access to finance or credit helps to build assets. About one-third (31.9 percent) of women (ages 15 and older) have bank accounts at a financial institution or with a mobile money service provider. The 2018 World Bank Enterprise Survey highlights that access to finance, competition with the informal sector, and insufficient access to electricity are key constraints to doing business in Lao PDR. Among households with loans, the main reasons for seeking credit are for agricultural production (33 percent), to meet essential household expenditures (29.9 percent), and to operate or expand a business (10.2 percent). Loans are procured primarily from the Government Bank (47.7 percent and 47.8 percent in urban and rural areas, respectively) and from the Village Development Fund (17.6 percent in both urban and rural areas). Low levels of financial literacy among women are a barrier to their obtaining credit. Many women take loans in their husband's name, as men are more comfortable with formal banking procedures, including loan repayments.

As of 2017, there were 55 microfinance institutes in Lao PDR, with over 200,000 active clients. More than 50 percent of these clients were female borrowers. Lao Women's Union has established three different types of funds in different parts of the country to improve access to credit: (1) 665 self-help group funds in six provinces, serving 111,878 members; (2) 1959 Village Saving Groups with a total of 218,289 members, to support agriculture and handicraft production, assist small business operation, and provide assistance for the sick; and (3) Bank of Lao PDR microfinance services for women and families in 15 branches, covering 121 villages and 152 groups with a total of 15,984 clients.

Access to the internet. Lao PDR was one of the last Southeast Asian nations to adopt the Internet, and the country is lagging significantly in terms of accessibility, quality, and affordability of Internet services compared to other comparable regional economies. As of July 2019, communications infrastructure covered 95 percent of villages with 2G and 45 percent of the country with 3G, but rural

and more remote communities remain underserved. A 2019 study examining the relationship between financial literacy and awareness of fintech development in Lao PDR found low levels of financial literacy and fintech adoption (only 3.7 percent of survey respondents); men, urban residents, more educated individuals, and younger persons were more likely to be aware of fintech products than women, rural residents, and older persons. Among those surveyed, more than 80 percent of respondents report using a telephone, but only 30 percent have a smartphone. Use of smartphones in urban areas is double that in the rural areas (47.3 percent versus 23.9 percent). Women are more likely to use smartphones than men, but the share of male and female respondents that do not use telephones at all is about the same. The report concludes that low levels of financial literacy and the underdeveloped state of ICT infrastructure in the country explain the lack of fintech adoption, and that general and financial education programs combined with ICT development will be a necessary condition for fintech development in Lao PDR.

B.5 PATTERNS OF POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

Lao PDR has one of the highest proportions of women in national parliaments in Asia, at 21.95 percent. However, the proportion of women in other government institutions is low. Women's representation is as low as 7 percent at the district level and 2.6 percent at the village level. Women also comprise 23 percent on average on Village Education Development Committees (VEDC), where women have the voice to address the gender needs relevant to education and children and to be part of decision making. In contrast, men are the primary decision makers at the household and community levels, especially in rural areas and among ethnic minorities, although women have some influence in family matters.

While women's rights are recognized in the legal system, women continue to struggle to participate on equal terms and in equal numbers at the community and household levels, especially in rural areas comprising 68 percent of the population. In the rural areas, the village chief and council hold the power to make decisions within the community, and fewer than 3 percent of village chiefs are women. At the national level, the 69-member LPRP Central Committee included seven women, and three women were elected to the 27-member cabinet. Minority communities have also somewhat increased representation: in the 2016 congressional elections of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), ethnic minority members secured 15 seats (an increase from seven) in the 69-member LPRP Central Committee and three seats (an increase from two) in the 11-member Politburo; in the cabinet, the ethnic minority ministers also increased from two to six, including a deputy prime minister.

The new GOL five-year 2021–2025 National Socioeconomic Development Plan announced specific goals to increase women's participation in leadership and management positions at every level: 30 percent or more of members of the National Assembly and Provincial People's Assembly; 30 percent or more in leadership positions at the central level; 20 percent or more in leadership positions at the provincial and Vientiane Capital level; 20 percent or more in leadership positions at the district level; 10 percent or more in leadership positions at the village level; and 50 percent or more of civil servants.

As noted, the NCAWMC has sub-committees (SubCAWMC) established across ministries, within state organizations, and at the provincial and capital administrative levels, creating a network of gender focal points that can serve as critical positions of decision-making for women. However, this commission still lacks critical capacity, resources, and institutional support to successfully advance and promote gender issues. Furthermore, there is a lack of perceived legitimacy of the SubCAWMC units, as there is limited public support for women's issues being given high priority.

A significant barrier to obtaining and performing in decision-making positions is posed by lack of ability in the national language, especially important for understanding laws and legal documents. Some 70 percent of the population does not speak Lao as their first language, and approximately 50 percent of children starting school each year do not speak Lao. Additionally, 41.8 percent of girls aged 15–17 are currently out of school, largely due to high rates of early marriage, preventing them from developing their social and economic potential as well as national language acquisition. USAID Learn to Read Program is producing materials that will assist ethnic minority students in learning the national language.

Within traditional culture, the family system—either patrilineal or matrilineal—delineates decision-making power and residential patterns, i.e., patrilocal or matrilocal. This varies across ethnic groups. Lao-Tai women possess greater decision-making power, as their group follows a matrilineal system; in groups with a patrilineal system, men hold the decision-making power. Whether matrilineal or patrilineal, some decisions are gendered based on cultural norms, particularly marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Some studies found that men and women make decisions jointly concerning crops and livestock production activities. Moreover, in modern residential patterns younger families are living by themselves (i.e., neither patrilocal nor matrilocal), resulting in higher rates of education for women and shifting traditional decision-making norms in urban areas.

Social power imbalances affect the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls in Lao PDR. Women's lack of decision-making power, even in the area of family planning, exacerbates female vulnerabilities particularly in reproductive health. Research has shown that controlling behavior patterns at the household level are a critical factor in violence against women, correlated with a higher likelihood of both sexual violence and physical violence. These controlling behaviors are also correlated with the broader cultural power dynamic: male dominance in the household mirrors, and promotes, the cultural and political emphasis on masculinity in the society. Thus, violence against women stems from a value system embedded within a construct of masculinity, control, and power over women.