

PROGRESS TO THE BEIJING PLATFORM OF ACTION IN LAO PDR

IN BRIEF

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY FOR ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN LIVING IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES IN LAOS



BACKGROUND

LAO PDR IS A LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. IT RANKS 139 OUT OF 193 COUNTRIES ON THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX[1] AND 116 OUT OF 166 ON THE GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX.[2]



MAP OF LUANG PRABANG

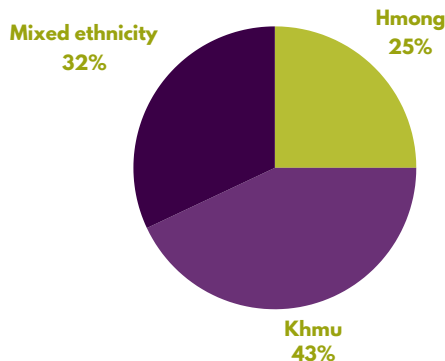
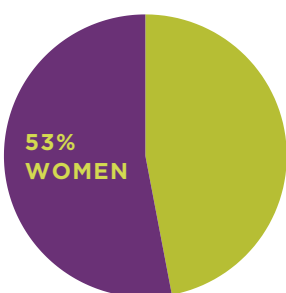
»» The Government of Laos (GoL) has demonstrated significant progress in its compliance to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[3] and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA)[4]. In 2019, it developed the Law on Gender Equality[5] and in 2022, three standard operating procedures for the justice, health and social sectors [6] to prevent and respond to cases of violence against women. Gender focal points have been appointed within all government ministries to ensure that new laws and national action plans are effectively implemented at all levels of government and across all sectors. However, the National Center for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children (NCAWMC) in 2024 reported that fulfilling the BPfA in Laos remains challenged by the 'low level of understanding and acceptance of gender equality among the general public, especially those residing in rural and mountainous areas'. [7]

It suggests a strategic approach that will enhance awareness-raising and alter social norms through the involvement of men and boys, awareness campaigns, and educational programs. World Renew began programming in Laos in 2012, and initiated efforts alongside our district partners in the ethnically diverse Phonthong District, Luang Prabang Province in 2021. This integrated community development approach covers 16 villages inhabited by Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups. It aims to reduce poverty and improve resilience and well-being.

[1] Human Development Index <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>  
 [2] Gender Inequality Index <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>  
 [3] UN (2024) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Concluding observations on the 10th periodic reports of the Lao People's Democratic Republic <https://digitalibrary.un.org/record/4067566?y=pdf>  
 [4] Lao PDR National Center for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children. 2024. National Review: Thirtieth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women adopted Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) (BPfA+30).  
 [5] Presidential Ordinance of Lao PDR (2020) Law on Gender Equality, Vientiane, Lao PDR.  
 [6] Ministry of Justice UNDP (2023) Standard Operating Procedure for Justice Sector. <https://www.undp.org/laopdr/publications/standard-operating-procedures-justice-sector-response-and-prevention-violence-against-women-and-children>  
 [7] Ibid, pg 1.  
 [8] World Renew Lao (2021) Gender Needs Assessment (unpublished)

GENDER INEQUALITIES

A COMPREHENSIVE GENDER NEEDS ASSESSMENT (GNA)[8] CONDUCTED IN PHONTHONG DISTRICT IN 2021 IDENTIFIED THAT GENDER INEQUITIES ARE DRIVEN BY PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL NORMS, WHICH IMPACT WOMEN'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND THEIR DECISION MAKING ON SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.



HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS WERE UNDERTAKEN WITH 235 WOMEN

## THE MAIN FINDINGS ARE DISCUSSED BELOW



### >>> WORKLOAD AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Women have more work tasks than men such as rice harvesting, kitchen gardens, household chores and childcare. But men consider them light work where

“  
**MEN WORK LESS, BUT ITS HEAVY WORK, WHILE WOMEN WORK A LOT BUT ITS LIGHT WORK,**  
”

ACCORDING TO A HMONG MALE PARTICIPANT IN HUAYTHONG VILLAGE.

However, this limits women's participation in community activities or attending to their health care. They also have fewer opportunities to generate income due to the burden of unpaid care work.

### >>> DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

Patriarchal social norms are a root cause of gender inequalities, leading to domestic violence and conflict, especially in Hmong communities.

“  
**SOME PEOPLE THINK BEATING THEIR WIFE IS NORMAL. IN ANY CASE, (I) DO NOT WANT TO HAVE IN THE FUTURE,**  
”

SHARED A HMONG MAN FROM KORNOD VILLAGE.

This is consistent with the Lao Social Indicator Survey 2023 (LSIS III)[9], which reported a higher percentage of women who believed their husbands were justified to beat them (12.5%) compared to men (10.6%), with even higher numbers among Hmong women (20.6%) compared to men (15.1%).

“  
**YES, HUSBANDS BEAT THEIR WIVES BECAUSE THEIR WIVES 'TALK TOO MUCH'. WE CAN'T STAND IT**  
”

SAID A KHMU FEMALE FROM NASAMPHAN VILLAGE.

### >>> DECISION-MAKING

Half of the Hmong men surveyed believe they are the dominant decision-makers and that women can decide only 8% of the time. Hmong women have the least say in decision making such as family planning or participating in community meetings.

“  
**IT IS ALWAYS MEN DECIDING ABOUT FAMILY NUMBERS EVEN THE MOTHER IS TIRED. IF THE HUSBAND WANTS 10 CHILDREN, THEN ITS 10 CHILDREN,**  
”

SHARED A HMONG MOTHER OF FIVE CHILDREN FROM HUAYEN VILLAGE.

### >>> RESOLVING DOMESTIC CONFLICT

Patriarchal norms combined with customary law prevails in resolving conflict between couples, including violence towards women. The preference is for resolving conflict within the family. External resolution systems, like the Village Mediation Unit (VMU), are seldom used and as expressed by one village leader, often lack capacity.

“  
**SOMETIMES THEY (CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOCAL POINTS) DON'T SEE BOTH SIDES WELL; THEY ONLY SEE ONE SIDE VIEW AND NOT DEEPLY**  
”

SAID A MALE KHMU VILLAGE HEAD FROM DONGERN VILLAGE.

### >>> ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

A significant challenge for ethnic minority women and girls in rural communities is access to health services and to education. The GNA found Hmong girls have 30% less chance to be enrolled in school than Hmong boys. The causes of inequity in school attendance are multi-faceted including, distance, Lao language ability, number of siblings, poverty and early marriage among girls. Similarly, uptake of health services is lowest among Hmong women.



**74%**

of Hmong Women Deliver at Home

**Only 9.5%**

of Hmong women attended four or more ANC checks



compared to **36%** among all women.

# PROGRAM RESPONSE TO REDUCE GENDER INEQUITY

WORLD RENEW AIMS TO ASSIST THE GOVERNMENT OF LAOS IN ALLEVIATING POVERTY AND IMPROVING GENDER EQUITY. WE WORK IN REMOTE RURAL COMMUNITIES, APPLYING A PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION (PLA) APPROACH, ENGAGING FORMAL AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS, WITH LOCAL STAFF AND GOVERNMENT COUNTERPARTS WHO ARE FROM THE SAME COMMUNITY TO EFFECT CHANGE. THIS MAKES US WELL POSITIONED TO INFLUENCE PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL NORMS IN POPULATIONS WHO ARE MOST AT RISK OF BEING LEFT BEHIND.

## WORKLOAD AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Community awareness-raising and dialogues utilizing posters and visual aids designed for low-literacy audiences, fostered an enabling environment and empowered women to understand their land rights. Recognizing that drug abuse can lead to poverty and violence, we facilitated drug detoxification for 18 people including one couple who then received training in poultry farming. This created a joint livelihood and improved the division of household responsibilities.

## RESOLVING DOMESTIC CONFLICT

In remote ethnic communities like Phonthong District, resolving conflict is challenged by embedded social norms and customary law<sup>[10]</sup> that often positions women outside of the formal justice system. World Renew staff and district partners share the same language and ethnicity, which is strategic for building trust and identifying and mobilizing formal and informal leaders to influence change. Recognizing that social norms contribute to social identity, the Hmong ethnic group, known for their strong clan culture and sense of belonging, exemplifies this idea. We leverage constructive social norms and celebrate positive changes that create barriers to gender equity; for instance, by catalyzing community discussion on attitudes toward violence against children and promoting alternative disciplining techniques.

The Village Mediation Unit (VMU) was established by the Ministry of Justice in 1997 to formalize the customary practice of mediated negotiation for resolving civil disagreements. Despite the VMU, conflicts are often dealt with internally within the family, hindering a woman's recourse to a formal justice system, alongside additional barriers of women's low literacy, costs, and fear of retaliation. Collaborating with the district Justice Department and LWU, World Renew has co-designed gender-sensitive VMU training programs and ensured a Lao Women's Union representative is part of the VMU. Guidance on which cases can be mediated, and which should be referred has enabled women to be connected to the local justice system at the foundational grass-roots level.

## ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Community meetings to explore barriers to accessing services were convened with the health center staff, the village health volunteer, and the community. This fostered trust and dialogue, which strengthened communication and links between the community and the health facility. Consequently, the uptake of four or more ANC visits among Hmong women improved from 9.5% at baseline to 20% at endline. Access to education was also strengthened through building of schools, training teachers, and supplying school materials to children from disadvantaged families

## NATIONAL LEVEL ADVOCACY

We conducted timely and strategic advocacy at national level such as presenting the GNA findings at the Development Partners Gender Working Group based in Vientiane Capital, and providing feedback on policy documents e.g., the National Standard Operating Procedures for GBV. This has ensured that the challenges for ethnic women in remote communities were discussed in a wider audience and mainstreamed. A multilevel approach at the grassroots, district and national levels ensures that the insights gained from the field have a platform, and that the lived experiences of the community women are amplified and recognized.



# REMAINING GAPS

Despite commendable progress by the Government to reduce violence against women and improve gender equality through legislation, policy commitments and action plans, gaps remain as highlighted by the CEDAW committee: Point 25: the need to eliminate patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society; Point 26: the increased incidence of domestic violence in the context of economic crises, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged and marginalized groups of women; and Points 33 and 46: representation and economic empowerment for ethnic minority groups, women with disabilities and women living in poverty.



## »»» RECOMMENDATIONS

### Legal and Policy Strengthening

Ensure that laws, policies and national action plans are effectively disseminated and understood by rural and remote communities. This requires translating IEC materials into ethnic languages and adapting them for low-literacy communities using visual aids (e.g., posters, radio in ethnic languages, etc.)

### Addressing Social Norms and Attitudinal Barriers

Continue to leverage traditional and informal leaders, as well as youth, as role models and shift attitudes and beliefs while respecting how norms are a core part of social identity. Celebrate positive changes in norms and progressive shifts in attitudes and beliefs.

### Engaging Rural and Remote Communities

Facilitate collaboration between government and nongovernment actors (e.g., civil society groups) that are working in rural and remote communities, providing opportunities to maximize impact. Mobilize staff and district counterparts from the same ethnic groups and communities to foster trust and help promote change from within.

### Leave No One Behind

Ensure the inclusion of marginalized communities in all their intersecting identities such as disability, ethnicity, poverty, and empower them with opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

