Status of Women:

LAOS

Prepared by
National Union of
Lao Women
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In recent years, particularly since the declaration of U.N. Decade for Women in 1975, women's problems have come into sharp focus. Fundamental questions regarding the roles men and women play and their relationship within the present social framework have been raised. Researches have been carried out on women's role and status in different societies with a view to evolving strategies to ensure more equal and desirable pattern of relationships between men and women.

To pursue this goal and responding to strategies and plans of actions for the advancement of the status of women adopted at the three World Congresses on Women held in Mexico, Copenhagen, and Nairobi respectively, many countries prepared special programmes for women and their development. In some countries, national machineries have been set up. Some governments have even established special ministries for Women's Development. During the International Decade of Women, governments and private organizations have taken a series of measures to enhance the status of women, to better the quality of their lives, and to ensure their participation in the development programmes.

During the Decade several countries set up committees to study the status of women and carried out numerous researches. There is now quite a sizeable literature, and a growing community of scholars interested in research on women. Yet, in a number of countries such researches and studies are scattered and have not been utilized in effective way for policy-making and for raising awareness on women's issues amongst the general public. Furthermore, there are several gaps in our knowledge. There is also a need to do a review of the efforts made during the Decade and to evaluate their impact so that the present situation of women in different societies can be objectively assessed.
To fill this information gap, a project was launched in 1986 by UNESCO to survey the status of women in seven countries in the Asian Region, namely, Afghanistan, People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Maldives, Mongolia, Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The authors were requested to consolidate existing social science studies and statistical data on women and produce reports on the present day situation of women in their respective countries.

The Country Report on the Status of Women in the Lao People's Democratic Republic was prepared by the Lao Women's Union, following the guidelines developed by the UNESCO Secretariat. Researchers of the Lao Women's Union are to be congratulated for their sincere effort to collect the data required for review and analysis of the situation of women in Laos. The Report may encourage interested agencies to organize their data base and develop a pool to continuously generate data and update the profile.

Comments and suggestions on this monograph may be sent to:

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INTRODUCTION

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Located in South East Asia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is a land-locked country forming part of the region known earlier as Indo-China. She has common borders with Burma and China in the North-West and North, Thailand in the West, Vietnam in the East, and Kampuchea in the South.

Laos is characterized by its mountainous relief, which is a part of the westernmost of the three mountain ranges of the Indo-chinese Peninsula; the Northern part of the country is especially mountainous. The easternmost extensions of the Himalaya cross Lao territory from the North-West to the South-East. 88 per cent of Lao territory is covered with bushland and impenetrable forests. Land suited for farming, while extremely fertile, is scarce. Only 6.3 per cent of the land is used for agriculture, the remaining 5.7 per cent of the cultivable land lying permanently fallow.

Climatically, Lao PDR lies within the tropical monsoon belt of Asia. It has a distinctly wet season, from May to September, and a markedly dry season, from November to March. In terms of agricultural activity, it is seasonal variation of rainfall rather than total availability which determines the pattern of crop production. Periodical flooding followed by drought are common occurrences and these present serious problems to agriculture and communication. The annual rainfall average is 2,000 mm.

According to the 1985 census, Laos has a total population of 3.6 million (3,584,803) distributed over a total area of 236,800 sq. km. giving an average density of 15.1 persons per sq. km. Population distribution is, however, very uneven. More than 60 per cent of the population is concentrated in the riverine provinces bordering the Mekong river: namely, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champassak, Luang Prabang and Khammouane.
### Women in Laos

#### Table 1.1: Population of Lao PDR by province and by sex (1985)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Percentage by column</th>
<th>Percentage by row</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane municipality</td>
<td>377,409</td>
<td>148,273</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>48.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phongsaly</td>
<td>122,984</td>
<td>63,059</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>51.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Namtha</td>
<td>97,028</td>
<td>50,593</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>52.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oudomsay</td>
<td>187,115</td>
<td>96,545</td>
<td>51.60</td>
<td>51.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bo Keo</td>
<td>54,925</td>
<td>28,565</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>52.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>295,475</td>
<td>149,273</td>
<td>8.16</td>
<td>50.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houa Phanh</td>
<td>209,927</td>
<td>105,181</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>50.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sayaboury</td>
<td>223,611</td>
<td>113,848</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>50.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiengkhouang</td>
<td>161,589</td>
<td>80,978</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>50.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>264,277</td>
<td>131,705</td>
<td>7.02</td>
<td>49.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolikhamsay</td>
<td>122,300</td>
<td>62,369</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>50.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khammouane</td>
<td>213,462</td>
<td>111,422</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>52.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannakhet</td>
<td>543,611</td>
<td>279,755</td>
<td>15.30</td>
<td>51.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saravane</td>
<td>187,515</td>
<td>99,275</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>52.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sekong</td>
<td>50,909</td>
<td>6,252</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>51.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champassak</td>
<td>403,041</td>
<td>207,801</td>
<td>11.36</td>
<td>51.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attapeu</td>
<td>69,631</td>
<td>5,794</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>51.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,584,803</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,827,688</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>50.984</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Official census figures.

The Lao PDR is an ethnically diverse society. No less than 68 ethnic groups have been enumerated within its geographical boundaries. These ethnic groups are often divided into three main groups: Lowland Lao (Lao Lum), Midland Lao (Lao Theung) and Upland Lao (Lao Sung)[Halpern, 1964. p.5]. The Lao Lum, comprising an estimated 45-50 per cent of the population, is the majority group. The Lao Theung, which are made up of groups like the Khmu, Loven, Tin Lamet, constitute another 30 per cent. Yao, Mien, Mong, comprising the majority of the Lao Sung, form about 15 per cent of the population. There are also people of Vietnamese, Chinese and Indian origin who are mainly settled in the urban areas.
THE HISTORY

From time immemorial Lao people (or Lava) have installed themselves in the upper valley of the Mekong river. King Fa Ngum unified the country under his rule when he founded, in 1353, the Lao Kingdom of Lane Xang (or Kingdom of a Million Elephants) and established his royal seat in the city of Luang Prabang. Fa Ngum married the daughter of the King of Angkor (in Kampuchea) and with his help marched on Luang Prabang, accompanied by a number of erudite Buddhists, sculptors and artisans.

In 1560, the capital city was moved from Luang Prabang to Vientiane. By that period, Buddhism had spread throughout the country.

In the 17th century the Lao people produced many outstanding thinkers, writers and poets who wrote valuable literature such as the epic legend of Sin-Sai. The Lane Xang Kingdom received the Dutch ambassadorial, religious and trade mission in 1641. But the country did not have diplomatic relations with any other countries of the world.

In 1698 the Lao Kingdom was divided into three smaller Kingdoms: the Lane Xang Kingdom of Vientiane, the Lane Xang Kingdom of Luang Prabang and the Lane Xang Kingdom of Champassak. This facilitated occupation of the portions of Lao territory by external powers.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the French succeeded in colonizing Laos.

After the First World War, the three Indochinese countries joined the communist movement by founding a communist party under the presidentship of Ho Chi Minh on 3 February 1930. Laos set up its own party in 1936 to intensify mass movement and wage a war of freedom which led to its independence in October 1945. But the situation did not return to normalcy, and the liberation struggle had to continue till December 1975. In this freedom struggle, Lao women also made a significant contribution.
PLACE OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL LAOTIAN SOCIETY

Lao society consists of 68 ethnic groups. They are broadly classed into three major categories: Lao Lum, Lao Theung, and Lao Sung. Each group has a rich and long cultural history. However, there are several commonalities between them, particularly in the sphere of religion. The country was exposed to Indian civilization through which first the elements of Hinduism and later of Buddhism arrived and got assimilated into Laotian culture.

Despite cultural variations, one aspect was common in all the ethnic groups: the lower status of women, compared to men. Being a patrilineal society, the males always got the primacy at home and in the community. Women were economically dependent on men. Tradition forbade education to women; as such, they remained illiterate and bound to their home and family. It was not uncommon for the rich and the powerful men to have several wives; in fact, polygamy in the feudal society was an indicator of a man's superior status. Women were confined to their kitchen, and were required to look after their children, and assist their men in agriculture. They fetched water, carried loads of harvest from fields to home, and were treated as playthings for men. In big cities, they were also forced to prostitution. They had no voice in the community's affairs. Usually families were large, with several children and many generations living together. This imposed great burden on women.

In those days, women married young. Consequently, they became mothers at young age. In the absence of medical care, their health tended to deteriorate. Both infant mortality, and female mortality were relatively high.

HISTORY OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

In 1930, alongside of the founding of the revolutionary movement in Indochinese countries a women's movement sprang. The Lao women's movement received a new light and was waged with consciousness and staunchness in various forms such as: fighting directly to oppose the imposition of heavy taxes, protesting against the enrolment of their men as coolies without any retribution and against their maltreatment and humiliation. They also defended the rear and transported munitions and
Women in Revolutionary Forces.
food supplies to freedom fighters. During that period, young women's units were set up in various provinces. In 1945 a great number of women participated in the uprising to liberate the country.

After the World War II, the revolutionary forces shifted to the countryside, and the women's movement rapidly spread. *Lao Issala women* (free Lao women) and unit of soldiers' mothers were set up to take care of the soldiers, to protect and cater for cadres conducting underground activities. Many of these women became guerrillas, scouts, and messengers. Women organized campaigns for production, education, and hygiene. At the same time, women partook in several fights, and suffered several casualties.

In March 1955, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party was founded. The party decided to establish the Lao Patriotic Women's Association on 20 July 1955, in Huaphanh, one of the re-grouped provinces of the Patriotic Forces. The Association issued its initial statute and mapped out a programme of action aimed at rallying women of all ethnic groups and social strata in the struggle against foreign invasion. This resulted in the signing of the historic *Vientiane Agreement* on the implementation of national concord in 1957. It was the first time in the nation's history that women of various ethnic groups got the right to vote and to be elected. For the first time a woman delegate from the Patriotic Forces was elected to the National Assembly.

In the building of the liberated zone into a state, the women constituted an important force. They were involved in every sphere of work: culture, education, health, serving the fighting, protection of offices, factories, enterprises etc. They dug caves, transported and installed in them heavy machines to set up factories. They also went on patrol and monitored guards to ensure normal production. Women health workers and teachers performed their duty under the rain of bombs and recorded brilliant achievements. Women in Art Ensembles and Acrobatic Troupes, surmounting all difficulties, went up the mountains and down the valleys to entertain the fighters on the battle fronts and the population of all ethnic groups. Most notable was the 42-day long struggle of the people of Nongbok district, Khammouane province, in which women made up an important force leading to the victory of the liberation forces.

At the same time oversea Lao women, though living far away from their homeland, always turned their thoughts to their country. They also supported their compatriots at home in various ways.
Women in Laos

Under the aegis of the Lao Women's Association a Committee was set up in 1965 with a view to uniting the Lao women of all ethnic groups and social strata throughout the country. The Association had over 426,000 members in various regions and branches of activities.

Since the first National Congress of Lao Women, that took place in 1984, the name of the Lao Women's Association has changed to Lao Women’s Union. It is a member of the Women's International Democratic Federation. The main function of this organization is to educate women in order to raise their socialist consciousness and knowledge in all fields; to enhance their participation in the management of the economy, the State and Society; to promote equality between women and men, and to truly emancipate women in order to allow them to take an active part in defending the homeland and building the nation.
SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

THE POPULATION

Lao has a population of 3.58 million people. Unlike other countries in Southeast Asia where there has been a rapid growth in the urban population, this country has remained predominantly rural. Only 14.65 per cent of the population is classified as urban. The largest urban concentrations are found in the cities of Vientiane (150,000), Savannakhet (50,000), Pakse (20,000), and Luang Prabang (8,000). The rest of the population is scattered in some 11,000 or more villages.

The demographic structure of Lao PDR also resembles that of most of the Third World countries; that is, it is characteristically young and growing very rapidly. At present, women constitute 51.8 per cent of the population and more than 45 per cent of them are within the reproductive age groups 15-49 (see Table 2.1).

The population is currently estimated to be growing at 2.9 per cent per year, one of the fastest growing populations in the region. The government of Lao PDR regards rapid population growth as a welcome phenomenon because of the small size of the population in relation to land. It also believes that a larger population is needed by the country both for national defence and economic development. Hence the government's population policy is explicitly pronatalist and the import of contraceptives is discouraged. The policy together with the already existing cultural tendencies towards large families has resulted in very high fertility rates. Crude birth rates are estimated to be above 46 per thousand and total fertility rate per woman is about six (UN Population Chart 1986).
Women in Laos

Table 2.1: Age Distribution of Female Population (1985)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Percentage by column</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Percentage by column</th>
<th>Percentage by row</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>620,470</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>304,511</td>
<td>16.66</td>
<td>49.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>511,103</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>250,057</td>
<td>13.68</td>
<td>48.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>454,360</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>222,812</td>
<td>12.19</td>
<td>49.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>344,954</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>183,177</td>
<td>10.02</td>
<td>53.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>281,716</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>155,483</td>
<td>8.05</td>
<td>55.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>277,759</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>145,949</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>52.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>199,137</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>103,617</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>52.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>187,923</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>94,437</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>50.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>128,363</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>67,871</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>52.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>141,437</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>73,840</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>52.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>110,826</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>57,779</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>52.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>102,455</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>52,950</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>51.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>79,288</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>40,038</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>50.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-69</td>
<td>58,477</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>28,317</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>48.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-74</td>
<td>36,731</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>19,526</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>53.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>49,834</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>27,324</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>54.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 3,584,803 100.0 1,827,688 100.00 50.98

Source: Official census figures
(For every 100 males there are 104.01 females)

SEX RATIO

According to the 1985 census, there are 1,827,688 females in the Lao PDR comprising roughly 50.98 per cent of the total population. The ratio is slightly in favour of females. The sex ratios are especially imbalanced in the able bodied age-groups (15-44), where there is a definite deficit of males to females (see Table 2.2). This pattern departs from that of more stable population and is probably due to the past wars and, more recently, to sex selective emigration. With the deficit of able-bodied men, the work burden on women is heavier.
Social demographic profile

Table 2.2: Sex Ratios for Selected Age-groups (1985)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Sex Ratio (percentage male)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>288,010</td>
<td>338,660</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>227,330</td>
<td>249,566</td>
<td>91.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>153,978</td>
<td>162,308</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>120,644</td>
<td>131,619</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Official census figures

The sex imbalance is more noticeable in some provinces than in others. Except for Vientiane Municipality and Vientiane Province where men outnumber women (sex ratios of 104.8 and 100.7), women outnumber men in all the other provinces. The most imbalanced ratios are for Saravane, Attapeu, Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Khammouane and Sekong (sex ratio from 88.9 to 93.9).

As these are areas where slash and burn (swidden) cultivation is still practised, the absence of men seriously affects the distribution of work in the village. Traditionally, much of the hard work is done by men. Women do most of the remaining work. With the imbalanced sex ratio in these areas, women, in addition to their usual chores, have to take on arduous tasks formerly done by men.

SECTORAL DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

1. Education

The system of education in Lao PDR comprises pre-school, general education, university, vocational and adult education. In general education, the system comprises five years of primary schooling followed by secondary schooling, divided into lower and upper secondary courses of three years each.
Women in Laos

a. **Literacy rate:**

Despite all attempts to eradicate illiteracy, available statistics indicate that during the decade 1970-1980 illiteracy has increased by 3.6 per cent. This is due to the rapid rise in population, which has made it difficult for the education system to cope with the problem. The illiteracy problem is acute in the provinces inhabited by several ethnic minorities. A recent Unesco study, based on the survey of 15 provinces inhabited by several ethnic minorities, and carried out in 1984-1985, indicates that there are as many as 765,400 illiterates in the 15-45 age-group; this figure represents 56 per cent of the total population (1.4 million) of these 15 provinces. However, in some other provinces which are more developed, the illiteracy rate is as low as 20 per cent (for example Vientiane Municipality, Vientiane Province, Savannakhet and especially in the provincial capitals).

Unfortunately, reliable statistics are not available for female illiteracy, but it can safely be assumed that illiteracy rate among women is much higher than men. This is also supported by the demographic composition of the country showing women outnumbering men. There is evidence to show that in most families education for girls is often given lower priority than that for boys. The reasons are varied. First, a tradition exists for education of boys to the exclusion of girls in the pagodas even before the advent of modern education. Second, differential sex role socialization tends girls towards domestic concerns. Many girls are, therefore, deterred from going to school by their parents if their labour is needed in the household. Third, large family size and competition for resources also disadvantage female children in favour of their male siblings.

In a FAO study carried out in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak it was found that there were more illiterate among women than men. This is shown in the following Figure 2.1.
Figure 2.1: Literacy by Sex and by Province

![Bar chart showing literacy rates by sex and province.](image)

Source: Maroczy, 1986, *Women in Food Production*, FAO, Figure 3
b. **School enrolment rate**:

In sheer quantitative terms, education in Lao PDR has greatly expanded during the last ten years. The number of schools, students, and teachers has increased by 77 per cent, 86.8 per cent and 82.9 per cent respectively between 1976-1985. Primary enrolment has increased by more than 50 per cent and secondary enrolment by nearly 200 per cent. In terms of enrolment ratios, primary enrolment ratio has reached 85.4 per cent in 1983-1984 compared to 67.5 per cent in 1975, and secondary enrolment ratio has increased from 5.2 per cent to 13.9 per cent for the same period (see Tables 2.3 and 2.4).

**Table 2.3: Total School Enrolment 1975-1985**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>1,136</td>
<td>5,296</td>
<td>9,736</td>
<td>10,399</td>
<td>13,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>317,126</td>
<td>479,291</td>
<td>480,535</td>
<td>480,871</td>
<td>481,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>26,743</td>
<td>63,982</td>
<td>64,456</td>
<td>64,500</td>
<td>67,833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>2,780</td>
<td>14,943</td>
<td>15,721</td>
<td>17,835</td>
<td>19,163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source**: Esquisse d'une co-operation internationale pour le developpement de l'education et des ressources humaines, Unesco, 1985, p. 3.

**Table 2.4: Gross Enrolment Rate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>87.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source**: Esquisse d'une co-operation internationale pour le developpement de l'education et des ressources humaines, Unesco, p. 7.
Trendwise, the most rapid rates of increase were recorded in the first five-years (1975-1980). Between 1980 and 1983/84, the overall growth rate in general education enrolment slowed to less than 2 per cent per year. This deceleration was especially marked in primary enrolment (increase of 0.4 per cent per year over the same period). Only pre-school and higher education sub-sectors maintained high growth rates. The primary enrolment ratio is now about average by Asian standards.

Regional variations in primary enrolment ratios are very great, as is shown in a Unesco sponsored survey of 1985, reflecting the difference in the level of development between provinces and between urban and rural areas (see Table 2.5).

### Table 2.5: Regional Variation in Primary School Enrolment Ratios (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Gross enrolment</th>
<th>Net enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane Municipality</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phongsaly</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Namtha</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oudomsay</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bokeo</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houn Phanh</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sayaboury</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xieng Khouang</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolikhamsay</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khammouane</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannakhet</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women in Laos

c. **Drop-out rate:**

Another very serious problem negating the educational prospects of school-going children in Laos is that of high drop-out rates. The Unesco study of 1985 estimated that out of 1,000 children of all ages enrolled in the first grade, only 139 eventually complete the five year primary education. This implies a loss of more than 86 per cent.

Survivor ratios are found to be especially low in the first two grades. Only about one-third of first graders pass to the second grade; and only half of the second graders go on to the third. Subsequent survivor rates improve slightly with each successive grade, with about 60 per cent of the children surviving from the third to the fifth grade, the last year of primary school. [UNESCO; 1985, p. 52] (See also Figures 2.2 - 2.4 for illustration of primary school drop-out rates for some provinces).

---

**Figure 2.2** Distribution of Students by Age and by Year of Study

Vientiane Prefecture

![Graph showing the distribution of students by age and year of study for Vientiane Prefecture.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>22,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>14,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>11,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>8,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th year</td>
<td>7,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.3: Distribution of Students by Age and by year of Study
Phongsaly Province

1st year : 7,096 students
2nd year : 2,350 students
3rd year : 1,468 students
4th year : 1,005 students
5th year : 551 students

Source: "Diagnostic, Ibid., p. 13"
Figure 2.4: Distribution of Students by Age and Year of Study
Luang Nam Tha Province

1st year: 4,794 students
2nd year: 873 students
3rd year: 405 students
4th year: 263 students
5th year: 163 students

Source: Diagnostic, Ibid., p. 14
The low survivor rates imply that the number of repeaters is high in each grade. Many of these repeaters do not proceed beyond the third grade and eventually drop-out completely. The low survivor ratios and high drop-out rates call to question the efficacy of the Lao education programme in human and in economic terms.

d. *The distribution of women students in different subjects:*

In Laos, there is no tuition fee and education is compulsory. Actually the number of female students studying in various schools and institutions within, and outside, the country has increased each year since 1975.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Teacher Total</th>
<th>Teacher Female</th>
<th>Teacher Percentage</th>
<th>School Total</th>
<th>School Female</th>
<th>School Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975-1976</td>
<td>11,848</td>
<td>2,847</td>
<td>24.02</td>
<td>4,444</td>
<td>114,017</td>
<td>37.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984-1985</td>
<td>17,512</td>
<td>6,754</td>
<td>38.56</td>
<td>6,881</td>
<td>224,799</td>
<td>46.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Doctors Total</th>
<th>Assistant Doctors Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>Assistant Doctors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1985</td>
<td>3,556</td>
<td>5,796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>2,676</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Women in Laos

The total female school enrolment in the academic year 1985-86 in various school levels is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Total enrolment</th>
<th>Female enrolment</th>
<th>Percentage female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creche</td>
<td>7,853</td>
<td>3,225</td>
<td>41.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>21,625</td>
<td>9,534</td>
<td>44.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>523,347</td>
<td>234,790</td>
<td>44.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary</td>
<td>74,456</td>
<td>31,904</td>
<td>42.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>22,741</td>
<td>9,129</td>
<td>40.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic school</td>
<td>12,356</td>
<td>4,926</td>
<td>39.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional school</td>
<td>2,823</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>28.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and universities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>665,201</td>
<td>294,300</td>
<td>44.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EMPLOYMENT**

Traditionally, women were not considered as part of the labour force. They contributed to the family farm and hearth, but did not take jobs outside. Lack of education among women coupled with a feudal ethos worked against women's participation in the economy. They were expected to play the role of a housewife and a mother. Years of war resulted in the ruining of the economy. War caused damage to property and to people. The entire economy was deranged, and the problem was geared to meet the exigencies of war. Since men had taken arms to combat, women were required to provide the support by direct and fuller participation in the economy. They replace men in fishing, in food gathering, and in cultivation.

After the liberation, the government had taken special measures to utilize the enormous women labour force in revitalizing the economy. It had promoted literacy among them, and organized courses in skill training so that they could be gainfully employed and contribute to family income. As a result, women's participation in the economy has greatly increased in the past decade.
Women workers in Rattan Furniture Factory.
Women's participation in employment today is quite high. They make up about half the active workforce. In the age group 15 to 44, a total of 1.42 million people are economically active; this group is made up of 52.8 per cent women and 47.2 per cent men, implying that women's participation in the economy is higher than men's.

Table 2.9: Workforce Participation by Age and Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total workforce 15-44 years</th>
<th>Male in percentage</th>
<th>Female in percentage</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>344,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>281,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>277,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>199,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>187,923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>128,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>1,419,852</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women's participation rate in the industrial sector is lower. Among factory workers, women comprise 20.3 per cent of the workforce. In the field of commerce, women make up 50 per cent; in the field of public health, women workers contributed 48.8 per cent. Up to now, women are quite well represented in the public service, some 22 to 25 per cent in various offices and departments, and 50 per cent in the field of education.

In handicrafts, a traditional occupation of the Lao people, women are now actively engaged in all parts of the country. About 60 per cent of the workers engaged in handicrafts are women.
Women in Laos

2. Health

During the colonial period, women and children as well as people throughout the country lived in extreme poverty. The people's standard of living was very low. The health care of people, especially that of mothers and children, was neglected. This was due to lack of medicines, poor sanitation, and non-availability of medical services. There were not enough hospitals. The infant mortality rate and the maternal mortality rate during delivery were therefore very high. Many pregnant women delivered at home or in the forests. Sometimes, a Lao mother gave birth to 17 or 18 babies but only two or three of them would survive the first year of life.

Since the foundation of the Lao PDR, efforts have been made to improve the health care of the people and particularly that of mothers and children. At present, the medical treatment in Laos is free of charge.

a. Infant mortality:

The mortality situation of a population is the best indicator of its health. In Laos, it suffers from a high general mortality (crude death rate of 17 per thousand) with a low expectation of life (49 years for men and 52 for women).

In 1985, there were about 620,000 children aged 0-4 in Laos. Approximately 100,000 babies are produced each year. The official statistics for infant mortality is 118 per thousand live births. In more concrete terms, nearly 12 out of every 100 babies born do not survive the first year of life. Based on United Nations estimates, the Under 5 Mortality Rate in Laos is around 175 per thousand live births [Statistics on Children in UNICEF Assisted Countries, data on Lao, PDR 1986].

Recent Ministry of Health data showed that estimated child death rate is one to four per thousand live births. This means that infant deaths account for 67.4 per cent of all deaths between zero to four years of age.

Comparing these figures with that of the neighbouring countries, the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and Under 5 Mortality Rate (USMR) of Laos is 262 per cent and 320 per cent higher than that of Thailand, and 157 per cent and 192 per cent higher than that of...
Social demographic profile

Vietnam respectively. Table 2.10 gives the mortality indicators of Laos as compared to some selected countries in Asia to illustrate the general mortality conditions which affect women and children in this country.

Table 2.10: Mortality Indicators of the Lao PDR and Selected Asian Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Crude Death Rate (per thousand population)</th>
<th>IMR (per thousand live births)</th>
<th>USMR</th>
<th>Life expectancy (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR (1)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand (2)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam (2)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma (2)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia (2)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India (2)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka (2)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(data refer to 1980)

Infants in the Lao PDR are exposed to endemic, transmissible, respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases from birth. Malaria is number one killer and is endemic throughout the region. Dengue fever, also a mosquito borne disease, is on the rise. Diseases like tetanus, diphtheria, typhoid measles, polio and tuberculosis are rampant and exact their toll especially among the children below 5 years of age.

Although data on regional variations of infant mortality are not available, it is clear that infant mortality is not uniform throughout the country. Babies born in the urban areas in Vientiane and in the major provincial cities have a better chance of survival than those born in the rural areas of the upland province. In certain districts of Bokeo, and upland
province with large concentrations of ethnic minorities, it has been found that nearly three out of every ten babies born die before one year (Le rapport de la situation nationale de Jeune Enfant 1985, p. 10).

b. Maternal mortality:

As data on adult mortality and morbidity are even more scanty, there is no information on maternal mortality. However, given the birth practices prevailing in the countryside, the poor sanitary conditions, and the low rates of immunization against tetanus among pregnant women, it is suspected that maternal mortality due to puerperal causes is high. Also given the close birth spacing and general unsatisfactory maternal nutritional status, it may be assumed that women too are prone to sicknesses like tuberculosis, malaria, diarrhoea, and other common diseases.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

According to the 1985 census, there are 1,827,688 females in the Lao PDR comprising roughly 50.98 per cent of the total population. Of the total female population, about 52.8 per cent are in the childbearing age-group (15-49). In Lao society, marriage is almost universal, and people marry at young age. Mostly, they get married at the age of 18-20. In some ethnic groups they get married at the age of 14-15. It can be assumed that the majority of women in these age-groups are also wives and mothers.

Age specific fertility data for women are not available. Based on the FAO study on "Women in Food Production" Maroczy found that the average parity of women in Vientiane Province was 5.1 children, Champassak 6.0, and Luang Prabang 7.0 [Maroczy: 1986, p. 13]. But these figures could have been under-estimated due to under-reporting of still-born or dead children. Women in the 25-44 age-group, who for the most part have not completed childbearing, have born 4.4 children in Vientiane, 3.6 in Luang Prabang, and 4.1 in Champassak.

Kripps' 1984 nutrition survey, which had fertility data of 1,633 mothers from Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Champassak and Khammouane, showed even higher average number of children borne. His sample of mothers in the 45-64 age-group (those who have completed
Social demographic profile

child-bearing) averages 8.6 children per women. On average, mothers in the age-group 30-34 have already borne a 4.5 children [Kripps: 1984, Table 10, p. 23].

Although these figures are based on small samples of women and may not be representative of the fertility situation for the whole country, they are, if anything, probably conservative estimates of the prevailing fertility behaviour among women. These figures are therefore indicative of the very high parities and short birth intervals among Lao women. The current pronatalist population policy and the non-availability of contraceptives will ensure that this situation will persist.

In the traditional Lao society, families were usually large, with several children and many generations living together. Mostly, there were about 8 to 10 persons per family.

Lao women, as is the tradition of most Southeast Asian societies, enjoy a slightly more egalitarian status in society than women in South or East Asia. There is no overt discrimination against females, no evidence of female infanticide or female crime, and Lao women often have similar inheritance rights as men. This is largely because the practice of matrilocal residence is still widely practised, especially among the lowland Lao, whereby a newly married couple generally resides with the girl’s parents. Land is, therefore, often passed down through the females.

The Government of the Lao PDR has clearly worked out a policy concerning the equality between women and man and done everything possible to truly emancipate women and help them constantly progress.
THREE

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

EDUCATION

1. **Literacy**

As has been shown in the previous chapter, women are still at a disadvantage in literacy and educational attainment compared to men.

It was estimated that in 1975, illiteracy was as high as 65 per cent. Illiteracy among those in the age group above 45 was probably well above 80 per cent, of whom more than half were women. One of the first tasks of the Lao PDR government was, therefore, to launch a series of literacy campaigns with the aim of eradicating adult illiteracy.

As a result, illiteracy among women has been eliminated in several provinces; for example, Phongsaly, Oudomsay and Saravane. The 1989 count suggests 98.7 literacy in the country which means literacy has spread among the sexes nearly equally*.

As education is one way to cut the vicious circle of ignorance, poverty, and ill health, female access to literacy is a means to bring about better maternal well-being and child development. The government has, therefore, taken special measures to promote not only, literacy, but education among women.

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* Khamphen BOUPHA, "Political Report of the Constituent Committee for the Lao Women's Union" at the First National Congress of Lao Women
Women's participation in public life

2. Enrolment Rate of Girls at Different Educational Level

The situation is getting better with younger women as a result of the expansion of the education system. With education now open to all regardless of sex, there are many more girls enrolled in schools today than ever before. The proportion of female students enrolled at all levels of education has increased markedly since 1975. There is near parity in primary school enrolment between boys and girls (44.86 per cent girls and 55.14 per cent boys). (see Table 2.8).

But the disparity gets greater at the higher level. For example, girls comprise 42.84 per cent of total enrolment at the lower secondary level, and 40.14 per cent in professional schools in 1985-1986. As has been said earlier, girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school after a few years of education.

3. Distribution of Girl Students in Various Subjects in Higher Education

In old days, only a small number of women in Laos had the opportunity to reach higher education level, and the great majority of those who did graduate from the university, did not take up any outside job because tradition prescribed that woman's place is at home.

Today, thanks to educational programmes opened equally to both sexes, numerous women are attending various courses at the universities in Laos. There are nearly 4,000 women studying in professional schools and four universities, which are equivalent to 37.67 per cent of the total number of students in higher education. Some statistics show the encouraging picture in terms of participation of women in higher education. For instance, in the 1984-85 academic year, female students comprised 37.74 per cent of the students in teacher's training university, in 1985-1986, they were 53.1 per cent of the students in medicine and pharmaceutical university, and in 1986-1987, they constituted 17.73 per cent of the students in architecture school, 14.52 per cent in polytechnic college and 16.27 per cent in post school institutions. (Source: Ministry of Education).
Women in Laos

Today, one fourth of the total population is attending various learning institutions. The number of students graduated from secondary institutions and universities in 1984-1985 alone equals the total number of graduates at the same level in the 80 years prior to 1975. Further, the total number of females at various educational levels is now almost equal to that of males.*

Education services received considerable external assistance. Major assistance is through bi-lateral arrangements principally with socialist countries and through multi-lateral arrangements through the UN agencies, in particular Unesco and UNICEF. Assistance from socialist countries (particularly Viet Nam, USSR, German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Bulgaria) is mainly in the form of training of specialists through fellowships to study abroad at the tertiary education level, i.e., technical colleges and universities. The number of girls and boys who receive fellowships abroad varies from 1,500 to 2,000 each year.

4. Participation of Girls/Women in Vocational/Skill Training

Before the Revolution Lao women were mostly semi- or un-skilled workers because they did not have opportunity for skill training. Today Lao women can enjoy their right to work, to study, and engage themselves in any professions as equal to men. They can select among many specialities in which they are trained as middle-level technicians, or skilled workers, in accordance with the country’s economic and scientific needs.

At present, many women are studying to be middle-level technicians. Some are being trained to become skilled workers. Such women constitute 26.2 per cent of the total trainees in these fields.

The training in these fields is a part of the subsystem of Technical and Professional Education, which has 51 study centres. Of these, 16 fall under the Ministry of Education and 35 under other state bodies, according to the statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education.

* Kaysone PHOMVHANE, Political Report to the Central Committee of Lao People's Revolutionary Party at its IV Party Congress (November 1986).
Women's participation in public life

Prior to the opening of these courses, the political and mass organizations rendered help in publicizing and disseminating information on the opportunities for studying at these polytechnics. A description of various programmes, job prospects for graduates, etc. were announced. The goal was to achieve a constant increase in women's participation into the fields in which these centres specialize, and their placement in technical jobs.

It is important to stress the change that has come about with respect to women and technical and professional education. In the 1986-1987 school year, the female enrolment was 44 per cent of the total enrolment. At present, there are young women studying in construction, which demonstrates considerable increase in the training of women and their possibilities for access to a large number of technical jobs.

Another important professional education for women in Laos is the promotion of handicraft. Traditionally, Lao women in all localities have been occupied with such work as, embroidery, lacing, spinning and weaving. They were able to produce their own clothes and also their family's. At present, there are some training centres created to promote Lao handicraft and, especially, to give women a good profession.

5. Non-Formal Education Programmes for Girls and Women

Given the low level of education and literacy, the government has launched in 1975, a special programme of non-formal education, including literacy programme and complementary school education for adults (including special minority school for adults).

The adult complementary education programme is designed mainly for non-qualified civil servants and co-operative members. Non-qualified civil servants are encouraged to take these courses as means to upgrade themselves. Almost all the provinces have one or two complementary schools where non-qualified civil servants can pursue full-time courses lasting about two years each for lower and upper secondary education.

Adult education for co-operative members is conducted at night or in the afternoon in existing school buildings or pagodas. These courses are shorter than those for civil servants and normally last one year each for lower and upper secondary courses. The differences reflect the urgent need to upgrade the level of the civil service.
Women in Laos

Special courses of three years each for primary, lower secondary and secondary courses, have also been conceived for ethnic minorities. However, because of the complexity of ethnic minority education, the programme has not yet been solidly established.

The impact of these courses is limited as less than 200,000 people in all are enrolled, of whom nearly 95 per cent are enrolled in the primary level courses.


"Education must be one step ahead of other activities; education is the core of the cultural-ideological revolution; education is the key to the successful socialist transformation and construction in the country". This is a government's policy reaffirmed at the Fourth Plenum of the Party Central Committee, held from 5 through 15 June 1987.

On the basis of the principles of fundamentality, stream-lining and practicality, the government has given priority to re-examine and revise the education curriculum and contents so as to ensure that they reflect the demand for all-round education, including the inculcation of political consciousness and moral behaviour, the importing of knowledge and working ability, the training of vocational skills and ability to defend the country, in accordance with each branch and level of study.

The government has used various forms of education suitable to the age and condition of each person to motivate people to go to school. Adult and general education programmes, regular and special classes, intensive and in-service courses, etc. were accordingly set up.

Considering the demands of the socio-economic development and the capabilities of the State, more general education and vocational schools, specialized secondary schools, and universities will be built with a view to gradually creating a full-fledged education system.

All schools must have sufficient number of teachers, and enough class rooms, and should be equipped with necessary tools, materials and other facilities for teaching and learning. The majority of villages must have the lower secondary schools. The State guarantees such provisions of schools at various levels.
In the political report of the Central Committee presented at its IV Party Congress, Mr. Kaysone PROMVIHANE, General Secretary, stated that by 1990, when the Second Five-Year Plan (1986-1990) will be completed, all the school age children in the lowland regions both urban and rural areas, should at least finish the primary education. For the mountainous regions school-age children must be encouraged to enroll in the primary schools, and increasing numbers of children are expected to receive primary education by 1990.

The basic requirement of the Second Five-Year Plan is to expand the already scored success, improve the educational control network, create favourable conditions for the standardization of education, and resolutely work in preparation for the firm and step-by-step educational reform.

ECONOMY AND PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITIES

As has been said earlier, women's employment is quite high. Women in Laos make up about half the active workforce of age 15-44 years.

A survey has shown that unmarried women of age between 15 and 22, work with the maximum efficiency (they often volunteer for hard work in all fields); output tends to decline for those women, aged between 23 and 35, most of whom have childbirths and child-bearing duties.

The distribution of the female labour force shows that women's participation in agriculture is especially high, while lower in the industrial sector. This is understandable since the country's economy is mainly based on agriculture. Women are fairly well represented in the civil service. They also participate in decision making, enjoy the right to vote, and are eligible for public and administrative offices at all levels. Among those women occupying senior posts, four women are members of the Central Committee of the Lao Revolutionary People's Party. In the Ministry of Health and Education, women are slightly better represented than in other ministries.

Statistics on the female labour participation do not always reflect the true value of women's economic role in society due to under-reporting. There are particular problems in taking statistics in rural areas where there is often a lack of separation between household and economic production. As a result, the female labour participation does not correctly reflect the amount of work women carry out. For example, Lao women, like women in other
Women in Laos

countries in Asia, are actively involved in every stage of rice production, especially in the kinds of work which are most tedious and time consuming, such as transplanting, weeding, threshing and hulling. These are also the kind of activities which cannot be done with the help of any animal or mechanical power.

In addition, women are engaged in other types of agricultural activities, especially the cultivation of subsidiary food crops (like vegetables, sweet potatoes, cassava, etc.), cotton growing and raising of domestic animals, which have made Lao PDR much less dependent on imports of essential consumer goods from other countries.

Today, women are a big force, and play a very important role in building the new economy. They have taken an active part in rehabilitating production in hard conditions, in building irrigation works, multiplying crops, applying new techniques to agricultural production, practising intensive farming and increasing production output. Especially women are very active in the movement of agricultural cooperativization.

Despite the principle of equal pay for equal work established in 1975, the equality of distribution of benefits between men and women is yet to be attained in actual life.*

It should be further noted that women's work at home, which is normally regarded as economically non-productive, thus unpaid, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, weaving and spining, childcare, and other house chores, are not counted for in the labour statistics. If taken all the multifarious chores performed daily by women into account, it is estimated that women in the rural areas work two hours longer than men per day.

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Woman casting their votes.
POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Participation in politics, including the exercise of political responsibilities, has led to a situation in which women are making use of their right to be involved in decision making processes at all levels of the state and society.

With the strong determination on the part of Lao women in the recent years and with the help of the Party and the government, many women now assume senior positions in the leading bodies of the Party and the Government at various levels and in different branches. They participate in decision making, enjoy the right to vote, and are eligible for different public and administrative offices.

Among many women occupying senior posts, are five members of the Central Committee of the Lao Revolutionary People's Party. At various provincial and grassroots levels, hundreds of women have taken part in the managerial boards and auditing commissions of agricultural cooperatives.

Women's participation in political activities has increased particularly since 1975. They are now well represented in the political arena and mass organizations, reflecting their own interests and wishes. Such participation, in return, would offer them wide ranging opportunities for their personal development as well as decision making. Women are actively participating in such organizations as Lao Women's Union, the Union of Lao People Revolutionary Youth, the Trade Union, the Lao Front for National Construction, the Labour Collectives and so on. They are also actively involved in the various socialist movements. For example, the movement called "woman of three 'goods' and two tasks", organized by Lao Women's Union: This movement advocates that women should be "good" citizens, while they are "good" mothers and "good" wives, and the two tasks which women are expected to carry out are: (i) emancipation of women and (ii) national defence and construction. This movement is an important contribution on the part of women to the cause of safeguarding and construction of the motherland, and to build a new society, new culture and new men and women for the durable and bright future of the coming generations.

Lao women are fully aware of the central aim of the socialist state's policies: to guarantee life in peace and comfort for all. They support the various activities that the Government undertakes at both national and international levels to preserve and safeguard peace. Many of them take part
Women in Laos

in the activities of national and international organizations such as the Lao National Committee for Peace and Solidarity with the Peoples, the World Federation of Democratic Youth, and the Women's International Democratic Federation. They participate in peace rallies, marches, petitions, meetings, collecting signatures, and organizing cultural performances for peace.

Women from all walks of life play their full part in the all embracing peace movement of the Lao PDR, which brings together people representing all sections of the population, various generations and different world outlooks. Being aware of their special responsibility for the well-being of the children as mothers, not only do women profess a heartfelt desire for peace, but also account for much of the strength of a nation and its capacity to avert war and keep the peace.

SOCIO-CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Women are commensurately represented in many spheres of public life. The equality between man and woman was reaffirmed by the government. A number of women are active in society. The number of young and educated women participating in public activities is in fact increasing. The advancement of the status of women in society is also manifested in the growing number of women who have been promoted in the various offices.

With a view to enforcing equality in terms of opportunity given for women in everyday life, the Lao Women's Union set up the Mother and Child Protection Department. Its task is not only to train women in the areas of general health, hygiene, child care, nutrition, food production, prenatal and postnatal care and child spacing, but also to work towards eliminating the de facto discrimination faced by women, thus bridging the gap between the precept and the practice.

The number of women participating in politics has been continuously rising for the last decade or so. About 4,856 women are Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Members of the Lao Women's Union are 446,141, or 24.31 per cent of the total female population. 89,294 girls are members of the Union of Lao People's Revolutionary Youth (ULPRY), which is 44 per cent of the total membership.
For many years, women have constituted an important force in preserving the tradition of Lao nation and in building a decent and wholesome way of life.

Women have composed songs, poems and dances, and written plays, short stories etc. bearing a national character, a fighting spirit and a socialist content. Through these artistic performances women take an increasingly active part and play a major role in creating a joyful atmosphere, in mobilizing the movements for productive labour, and for national defence and construction. Women, together with the masses throughout the country, are engaged in the eradication of the backward traditions, which have various negative effects on the labour and work, as well as on the health and progress of women.
EFFORTS TO AMELIORATE THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

Before the revolution, Laos was a country of inequalities. Over the centuries, people, especially Lao women, had to undergo heavy oppression by feudalism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. They were left to the mercy of their fate. Women were placed at the lowest stratum in the society, and regarded as servant to men. They were considered useful only because they could give birth to a baby.

Legally, women had no right at all and they could discuss either political questions nor the family problems. Their lives were entirely dependent on men's wishes -- those of fathers, of their husbands, and of their sons.

Since the liberation of the country, Lao Government has clearly laid down the principles with regard to the equality between men and women in all fields, political, cultural and social. All forms of discriminations against women in public life must be eradicated, while women's inferiority complex be overcome. To this end, the government has taken all necessary measures and encouraged women, especially women of the ethnic minorities, to participate in all social activities.

The Government has also made efforts to promote education for girls and women, so as to raise their technological and scientific qualifications and ability in various fields of activities.
PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH MARRIAGE

While some achievements have been made to advance the status of women, there are still some backward areas. Among ethnic minorities, for example, backward customs and habits still linger on. Mostly, women get married at the age of 18-20. In some case, they were forced by their parents to be married at the age of 14-15 because additional male labour is needed in their household.

Women even had no right to freely select their spouse. Their wishes to marry for love were ignored because it was the parents’ prerogative to arrange the marriage. They were forced to marry someone chosen by their parents. Women’s conducts were also restricted by religion, feudalistic and backward traditions and discriminatory ideas and habits. Women had no right to remarry after divorce, while a man could have many wives at the same time.

At the present moment, the question of women’s emancipation is regarded as an urgent problem in the country. It is perceived as an integral part of the socialist revolution. This task has been entrusted to the Lao Women’s Union (LWU).

The LWU organizational network extends from the central down to the village level. Its members represent the interests of women and aim at their mobilization to fight against all backward customs and habits harming women.

Some women in the rural area still do not understand that by law, they have the same rights that men have as citizen. Special attention has also been paid to raise women’s awareness and enhance their knowledge and qualifications so that they can fully enjoy their rights and freedom, and take an active part in the national development.

PROSTITUTION

Never in the history of Lao people has commodification of female sexuality been so widespread and such humiliation of humanity been so tolerated as in the period of the old regime.
Women in Laos

The loss caused by the war and the subsequent control over economy by foreign powers were enormous. People in rural areas were left without shelters and young girls were often misled to live in town and became prostitutes. Other serious consequences left behind by war and neo-colonialism are a depraved way of life, parasitism, drug addiction, family separation, unemployment, and a large number of orphans.

Over the past ten years or so, great efforts have been made by the Lao Government to solve these problems. Special training centres have been established for women who were victims of social evils. An integrated programme for rehabilitation of those women has been implemented, with such elements as reform, education, and skill training. Through the programme, those women learn to earn a decent livelihood, to find joy in labour, and to contribute their own share to national development and transformation.

NUTRITION LEVEL OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

Concrete data are not available on the actual nutritional situation and the type of nutritional deficiencies among girls and women. There are, however, some studies done on child and maternal nutrition in the country.

Maternal nutrition among the rural population is not very satisfactory. The situation in terms of specific nutritional deficiency, particularly in the mountainous regions, needs improvement. Lao diet is especially deficient in vitamin A, vitamin B2 (riboflavin), and moderately deficient in vitamin B1 (thiamine) and vitamin C. Vitamin A and C deficiencies are attributed to the low average consumption of vegetables and fruits. The main source for vitamin B1 and B2 in the Lao diet comes from rice. However, the habit of eating polished rice together with the practice of pre-soaking the rice before steaming robs it of much of its vitamin B.

Food shortage at the national level had been a serious problem during the war, before 1975. One of the consequences of the war was the destruction of natural resources. Even now, the effect of chemical sprays still prevails which continues to adversely affect people’s health. Malnutrition was quite serious among fairly large segments of the population at that time.

However, due to the government’s effort in boosting food production, rice self-sufficiency has been achieved at the national level since 1984. Hence, in terms of basic food availability, the problem is not so serious in the country at present.
Health care reaching out to the ethnic minority.
Specific food and nutrition objectives have been listed in the second Five-Year Plan. To pull every effort in solving the grain foodstuff problem is one of the central tasks during this period. The government expects an annual average yield of 450-500 kilograms of foodstuffs per capita. By 1990, the yield of grain in the whole country should reach about 2 to 2.5 million tons.

The government has also laid down a policy encouraging animal husbandry, attaching importance to household live-stock breeding.*

WOMEN OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

It must be noted that Laos is a country with many ethnic minorities. Some 68 ethnic groups live within its national boundaries. The lowland Lao, the majority group, comprises about 45.5 per cent of the total population. The rest are made up of upland minorities like the Muong, the Tai, the Yao, and the Mieu. Most of these upland ethnic groups are shifting cultivators. They have their own cultural traditions and languages quite distinct from the lowland Lao.

The national policy of the Lao PDR towards all ethnic groups is based on the principle of national integration, respecting each ethnic group's own cultural, religious and linguistic traditions. However, when it comes to the provision of social services, like education, health, food and nutrition, the ethnic diversity of the population still poses some problems.

Apart from the problem of transportation to reach the remote mountainous areas where the ethnic minorities live, the most serious obstacle in the extension of education in these areas is linguistic difference. Other problems are the poor sanitary conditions and the low rates of immunization against tetanus among pregnant women. It is believed that maternal mortality due to puerperal fever and related problems among women in ethnic and general unsatisfactory maternal nutritional status, it may be assumed that women in disadvantaged groups of population are prone to sicknesses like tuberculosis, malaria, diarrhoea, and other common diseases.

* Political report presented by Kaysone PHOMVIHANE at the IV Party Congress, Vientiane, November 1986. Minorities is rather high. Also given the close birth intervals
WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME AND SPECIAL WOMEN'S WELFARE PROGRAMME

In the last ten years, Laos has been engaged in rebuilding her economy and society after the warfare and political turmoil which lasted more than a quarter of a century. Progress has been made in various sectors of the economy, in particular that of agriculture. Economic development and prosperity, coupled with the economic structural reform, has created favourable social conditions for women to tap their intelligence and ability, participate more extensively in the nation's economic development, and in so doing, advance their status.

Under the present system, equality has been guaranteed and realized by the Government. Women are presently equal to men in work and education. They receive equal pay for equal work. The Government has taken a number of measures to create favourable conditions for women to participate in the national development programme and special women's welfare programme.

While the Government's policy ensures women of equal rights with men, the women themselves continue to work for the enhancement of their status through their own efforts and actual contribution.

Women deputies to the National People's Council, the supreme organ of the State power, now account for 10.7 per cent of the total. A number of women are working in government bodies at different levels, participating in decision making and administration in political, economic, cultural and educational fields. There are now multiple channels of employment for women. Except for a few hard jobs that are physiologically unsuitable for females, women are found in all professions.

Women represent an important productive force since they comprise 60 per cent of the agricultural productive labour force in the whole country. In the countryside, women are carrying all the heavy agricultural work, as valid young men are being mobilized to work the front.

In terms of the welfare of women, much progress has been made. As economic development improves public health, the general health level of women, including mothers, has greatly improved. A basic health infrastructure has been developed with the potential of expanding primary health care services all over the country. There is also an on-going programme for immunization, and diarrhoea and malaria control. In relation
Amelioration measures

to environmental health, some progress has also been made in the implementation of the Water and Sanitation Decade Plan for the provision of rural water supply and waste disposal facilities.

The rights of mothers and children have always been taken into consideration and put into practice. Pregnant women, nursing mothers, and those with a large family, receive special treatment if they are working in cooperatives or state cadres.

Provision now exists for granting pregnancy and maternity leave with full pay for 12 weeks. In case of sickness of children, mothers can stay away from work, receiving financial aid. Special time during working hours is reserved for nursing mothers to look after their babies.

Women with a large family are spared a certain amount of working hours so that they may have enough time to take care of their children.

In order to create favourable conditions for mothers to fulfill their task and to educate their children properly, the State has provisions to look after the children, from the time they are born throughout their schooling years.

In addition to the full pay for their work, the women cadres in government services and cooperative members receive some money for sanitation. Pregnant women also receive some money as subvention. The amount of such health related subsidies is not high, but it is one of the government's measures in the Special Women's Welfare Programme.

It should be added, however, that difficulties still exist in Laos for improvement of women's welfare. As Laos is a developing country with a relatively weak economic base, the Government cannot yet do all that it wishes to do for women's development. Besides, in the rural areas, women tend to be overburdened because of the multifarious chores that women are expected to carry out both at home and in the farm. There is a need to improve the welfare of women by upgrading their skills through training, and relieving them of their heavy workload through the adoption of labour saving technologies.

It is hoped that along with the enhancement of people's material and spiritual well-being, the problems of women's welfare and development will gradually be overcome.
Like other developing countries in the world, the level of maternity protection in Laos is not so high. As cited earlier, women of some ethnic minority groups tend to get married very young. Maternal mortality is high because of widespread anemia among pregnant women, poor maternal diet, short birth intervals and low immunization of pregnant women against tetanus.

The government regards rapid population growth in recent years as a welcome phenomenon because of too small a size of the population in relation to the land. Population growth is also desirable in terms of both national defence and economic development. Hence the government's population policy is explicitly pronatalist; the import of contraceptives and abortion is discouraged.

However, in order for women to participate freely and fully in public life, they need to control their own fertility by practising family planning and to share with men the child rearing responsibilities and other duties and obligations related to family life. The Lao Women's Union and Ministry of Health have strongly supported moves to promote and implement population activities. They attach great importance to population activities because the size, structure, rate of growth, distribution and movement of population are all linked to development. It is also necessary to create a social and economic milieu in the country conducive to smaller family sizes. The population policy covers various questions -- reducing infant mortality so that parents may be confident that their children will survive; educating people to understand the advantages of family planning and to make rational decisions as to how many children they want and how to space them; and improving both quality and quantity of managerial manpower. The Lao Women's Union has been increasing its assistance in this area.

In order to improve women's health and welfare, it has been proposed that LWU establishes its own training centre. Such centre would provide programmes to upgrade women's knowledge, especially for women in rural areas. At the Round Table Review Meeting held under the auspices of the Government of Lao PDR and the United Nations Development Programme in June 1987, the representatives of LWU identified areas in which assistance is urgently needed, which includes the funds for the basic skill training for women in women's health, family planning, birth spacing and children's education using scientific methods.*

* Presentation by Dr. Davone VONGSAK, Lao Women's Union at Round Table Country Review Meeting, Vientiane, 3-5 June 1987.
PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE ACTION

PRIORITIES

On the basis of data and information available on women in Laos, which are found limited though, following priority activities and areas may be identified.

1. Appropriate Technologies to Lighten Workload

As much of women's time and energy are spent for tedious household and farm chores, there is great need to lighten their workload and increase efficiency of their output through the adoption of appropriate labour saving semi-mechanized and mechanized technologies. Some of these technologies are in fact already available and have been successfully introduced in other countries, e.g. rice hullers, threshing machines, hand-pumps, fertilizer applicator/spreaders, flour mills, soy bean presses, food preservation and food processing technologies. It would be useful to study the economic feasibility and adaptability of some of these technologies for Lao women.

2. Income Generating Activities

The low income among women and their lack of control over economic resources of the household accounted for their inability to purchase better food and medicine for themselves and their families. This problem can be solved or eased by providing women with greater income generating programmes specifically designed for themselves. There is, however, a need to go beyond those activities which capitalize on women's supposedly "traditional" skills, such as needlework, weaving and cooking etc. The activities, unless accompanied by built-in programmes for mechanization and credit and marketing facilities, have limited benefits for
Women in Laos

women. By the time-consuming and labour intensive nature of these activities, such programmes may even add to the workload of women and increase the length of their work day.

To avoid such undesirable consequences, income generating programmes are best accompanied by training in marketing and accounting skills for women so that they would not lose control over the marketing of the finished products and the rewards of their labour. In the Lao context, the latter is very important. It is foreseen that many of the income generating activities which can be initiated will be for some time in the area of small scale traditional handicrafts, given that women have little alternative skills. Hence, it is all the more important to ensure that they will have the necessary organizing skills and management capacity to market and benefit from the products of their own labour.

Also, it would be beneficial to explore other areas for the purpose of income generation and women’s welfare. For example, small scale animal husbandry may be encouraged as this would provide women with a source of protein and products for sale, and small scale buying and selling cooperatives operated by women to upgrade their economic skills and decision-making power. Apart from the economic benefits women can derive from these activities, they are also important in helping women build up confidence in themselves.

3. **Promotion of Health Education**

Women have the obvious need to improve their health, particularly during childbearing period. A sound and increased understanding of maternal and children’s health related practices, including the importance of child spacing, immunization, environmental sanitation and oral rehydration has to be recognized by women themselves. This knowledge can be transmitted through health education programmes for women, more efficient utilization of existing channels like MCH clinics, village level women’s organizations and the mass media.

The basic programmes to achieve this goal have already been set up in primary health care with its related mother and child health services and integrated immunization and diarrhoeal diseases control programmes. These programmes, aiming at strengthening the assistance in terms of the level and efficiency of services, will go a long way in achieving greater local participation.
Priorities for future action

Strengthening of the health manpower resources (especially at the auxiliary levels, e.g. auxiliary nurses, TBAS) through training is another area that needs continued support to achieve better services delivery. In this regard, the type of training provided should be fairly well-rounded so that the most efficient use can be made of the personnel to cut down on duplication. This would also ensure that the level of integration of services would be enhanced.

On the user's side, there is a need to have closer coordination with the relevant institutions (schools, pagodas, mass media, grassroot level mass-based organizations) for more effective dissemination of information so as to elicit better local support and participation. Such efforts are necessary for the establishment of a proper foundation for a greater public awareness of the relationship between health, nutrition, disease prevention, environmental sanitation, personal/household hygiene and the survival and welfare of women and children.

Linked to the first, the second priority area should focus on disease control and eventual eradication, especially of debilitating and dangerous diseases such as malaria. Disease control and eradication can be brought about by better public health measures, especially in the improvement of environmental hygiene through the supply of safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal.

These activities can be expanded through more focussed programming as well as gaining support by raising awareness of public health for better environmental protection and sanitation.

4. Promotion of Basic Literacy and Education

In order to carry out the above-mentioned activities efficiently and effectively, upgrading of the educational level of women is essential. There is a need to continuously promote basic literacy and numeracy among women. In this regard, the non-formal education system for women needs to be strengthened and every effort be made to encourage women to utilize these services.

Education is ultimately the long-term solution for the present manpower shortage in the country. Education can lead people to new ideas and guide them to find better ways of doing things; thus can help them
Women in Laos

improve quality of their lives. It is, therefore, imperative that the present education system should be improved to provide better quality education and reduce the number of dropouts.

In this regard, the quality of teaching needs to be enhanced. Greater attention must be paid and programme assistance be further strengthened to upgrade teacher training. In particular, curriculum development for teacher training requires improvement paying greater attention to the pedagogical and psychological need of women. In order to incorporate women’s perspective and their needs in education, it is desirable to raise awareness of women’s cadres, who will become teacher and provide further training opportunities to upgrade them. It is also necessary to improve teacher-training manuals and ensure ample supply not only for instructors but also for trainees.

With the improvement of the quality of women’s cadres for teaching, there will be greater motivation on the part of women to take learning more seriously. The educational planners are expected to carefully examine the contents of the curriculum throughout the different grades and levels to make learning more interesting and relevant. Considering a great need felt for improvement of health and disease prevention, the curriculum should include a well planned programme on health education. Assistance is also required for development of textbook and supplementary readings which at the moment are short.

In sum, special attention should be given to ensure that women’s interests are amply safeguarded so that they can fully participate in the development process. This point is emphasized not only because they play an important role in society and child development, but also because they have a rightful claim for emancipation. Furthermore, it is important to stress the need for development programming to fully take note of the needs and interests of women. The priority needs of women may be briefly summarized as follows:

- reduce women’s work burden by incorporating economically feasible and adaptable labour-saving technologies in household and farm production.

- improve women’s access to financial resources by introducing income generating activities hand-in-hand with training for the marketing of these products.
Women participating in a development project as equal partner to men.
Priorities for future action

- in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, mount a serious and continuous literacy and non-formal education programme for women with adequate follow-up programmes and ample supply of reading materials for the neoliterates so that they can retain functional literacy.

In this regard, steps must be taken to ensure that ethnic minority women are also included.

- design health education programmes which focus on women's health. Information should also be disseminated on child spacing, maternal nutrition and child rearing practices.

As the above-mentioned points are all inter-linked, it is important that programme be developed in an integrated fashion. In this regard, it may be useful to involve the district level planners in programming so that various needs of women and children as well as the interest of the community as a whole be reflected in the development programme. Such projects, which can be cost-effective, are useful for their demonstrative impact and multiplier effect on neighbouring communities.

At the Round Table Review Meeting held under the auspices of the Government of the Lao PDR and the United Nations Development Programme in Vientiane in June 1987, the representative of LWU reported that the financial assistance would be required for the implementation of small scale projects in rural areas throughout the country. The aim of such programme is to assist women in participating in the development of the country. Under the scheme of "small scale projects" following activities are undertaken:

i) Professional skill training for women

- Financial support for the construction of a Lao women’s training centre.

- Financial support for the basic training of women in:
  (a) women’s health and prevention of diseases,
  (b) children’s diseases,
  (c) children’s education using scientific methods; and
  (d) birth spacing.
Women in Laos

- Financial support for the Lao women's newspaper.

- Skill training for women in such fields as household work, sewing, weaving, baking and soap making and basic technical training in animal husbandry and cultivation of crops.

ii) A project to improve home economy

- Guidance to grow vegetable and to plant, fruit-trees and other kinds of trees for industrial products.

- Animal husbandry.

iii) Introduction of new technology to lessen women's burden

- To develop and adopt labour-saving techniques/technologies for women such as rice-mills, clean drinking water, gumming machines, sewing machines and weaving looms, which would alleviate the hard labour of women.

- To provide basic transport facilities for Women’s Union extension work.

- To establish creches and kindergartens.

The above recommendations are made within the scope and framework of existing programmes. What is required most for their successful implementation, apart from financial and material commitments and technical assistance, is political commitment and will to achieve the set objectives.

CONCLUSION

The past decade was an extremely important period in Lao history. It was a period of national salvation after the liberation from nearly a century long foreign rule. Lao women are determined to join in the country-wide effort for national defence and construction.
Priorities for future action

The Lao PDR is engaged in rebuilding her economy and society. In the field of agriculture, she has already achieved self-sufficiency. She has also succeeded in creating a basic health infrastructure. Yet, there is still much to be done to improve the current situation of women, especially for women in the rural areas.

In education, efforts have been made mainly to eradicate adult illiteracy and to expand education. More girls are now enrolled in schools at every level, more teachers have been trained, and many more schools were built in the last ten years.

However, the literacy rate among women is still low. Girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school after a few years of education. The Lao Government and the Party are paying special attention, and attaching great importance to women's education.

The Lao Government has always attached great importance to the vital role women play in the society. From the very first day of the founding of the Lao PDR, it has been a policy of the State to bring about equality of women and men, and fully develop the ability of women, who make up half of the Lao population. The question of equal rights between women and men cannot simply be asked from the point of view of women's immediate interests. Rather this question should be considered in the context that whether or not the wisdom of the entire human race is turned to full account, and whether or not the social productive force is completely unshackled. Women themselves have played a major role in the achievement of fundamental advances in the political, economic, social, intellectual and cultural fields, and they consider it a great privilege to live in a country where equality and peace are secured.

It should be noted, however, that the country is not without any problems; difficulties still exist in Laos. Due to the financial limitation and a small population, the State and the Government cannot carry out all the activities they wish or plan to do; Women's programme is not an exception.

Parallel with those financial or physical difficulties and problems, Laos has also been affected by backward customs and habits, especially among women of ethnic minorities and in remote mountainous areas. These women still suffer from an inferiority complex, considering themselves incapable of shouldering important tasks in society and suitable only to family chores. As a result, they are not brave enough to strive to liberate themselves from old restrictions.
Women in Laos

Under the leadership of the Lao Women’s Union, women have increasingly assumed more important roles in the society than before. In order to support and encourage women for economic independence, the Lao Women’s Union came to the conclusion that it is most necessary to establish its own training centre. The objectives of this training centre are to upgrade the ability of women, and to give them opportunities for education and professional training. The project of this training centre has been supported by many international organizations. For instance, financial assistance was received from Unesco to carry out activities related to education, training and the elimination of women’s illiteracy. The work of this centre is particularly important for the women in rural areas. Once they return home, they can train other women in their respective villages and participate in the development and modernization of their own villages.

As mentioned earlier, what is required most for successful implementation of women’s development programme, apart from financial, technical and material assistance, is political will and commitment. In the Lao PDR, there already exists a happy juxtaposition between Party, Government, and People whose potential for social mobilization is great. This potential needs to be tapped to bring about a substantial improvement in the quality of life of women and children in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.
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