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Briefing Note

Empowering Women and Youth for Socioeconomic Development: Cases of Lao PDR

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Date of Submission: 30 December 2024

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Summary

This briefing note highlights the barriers limiting women and youth's contributions to socioeconomic development in Lao PDR, underscoring their critical roles. Although progress has been achieved, substantial challenges persist, notably in education access, economic participation, and traditional gender norms. The youth unemployment rate stands at 7.1%, surpassing the national average of 1.8%. Additionally, achieving gender parity in the labor force could boost national GDP by up to 22% by 2025. Recommended actions include expanding educational opportunities, promoting entrepreneurship, and transforming societal perceptions of gender roles. The Lao Parliament's proactive leadership is important in legislating inclusive policies, allocating resources, and facilitating partnerships to foster sustainable development and gender equality.

1. Introduction

Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) has achieved sustained economic growth over recent decades, transforming from one of Southeast Asia's least developed economies into a lower-middle-income country. However, the distribution of these economic gains has remained uneven, with women and youth in rural areas continuing to face significant socioeconomic disadvantages. Literacy gaps are pronounced; while urban female literacy rates stand at 94%, only 76% of rural women are literate[1]. Economic exclusion persists as well, with just 25% of rural women having access to formal financial services, limiting their capacity for entrepreneurship and financial independence[2]. Deep-rooted cultural norms further curtail women's participation in leadership and decision-making. While Lao Women's Union (2019) noted Lao has not yet to have women in leadership and decision-making positions at least 15-20 percent [3]. Although the Lao government has endorsed progressive frameworks such as the National Gender Policy and the Youth Development Strategy and implemented initiatives like the Lao Women's Union Microfinance Program, challenges in policy delivery persist. Limited financial resources, insufficient outreach to marginalized communities, and weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have constrained the effectiveness of these programs. This briefing note presents evidence-based policy options for parliamentarians to address systemic barriers in education, employment, governance, and cultural attitudes.

2. Education and Skills Development

In Lao PDR, limited infrastructure, long travel distances, and a shortage of qualified teachers continue to impede access to education for rural girls. These barriers have resulted in alarmingly high dropout rates, with 36% of rural girls leaving school before completing secondary education, with distance, safety concerns, and limited resources cited as primary factors[4]. Addressing these challenges requires innovative and context-specific interventions. Expanding mobile education units presents an effective solution by delivering educational resources directly to remote and underserved communities, thereby reducing geographical and infrastructural barriers. Furthermore, integrating vocational and technical skills training into school curricula helps ensure that education is relevant to the needs of local labor markets, enhancing future

employability for rural youth. A notable example is Save the Children's mobile education initiative in northern Laos, which successfully improved literacy among over 1,000 rural girls, highlighting the scalability and impact of targeted, community-centered educational interventions.

3. Economic Empowerment

Rural women in Lao PDR continue to encounter significant barriers to financial inclusion, which limits their ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities and achieve economic independence. Currently, only 25% of rural women have access to formal financial services, with many excluded due to stringent collateral requirements, limited financial literacy, and restricted mobility [5]. These challenges perpetuate economic dependency and prevent women from capitalizing on opportunities for income generation. To address these barriers, simplifying loan application procedures and reducing collateral demands are steps to consider. Complementary financial literacy programs can further empower women by equipping them with essential skills in budgeting, savings management, and small business operations. A successful example is the Women Entrepreneurs of Laos (WEL) initiative, which provided business training and microloans to 200 rural women. As a result, participants not only expanded their income-generating activities but also reported improved household incomes and financial security, demonstrating the positive socioeconomic impact of inclusive financial empowerment initiatives.

4. Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

In Lao PDR, longstanding cultural and social norms continue to confine women predominantly to domestic responsibilities, limiting their access to education, formal employment, and leadership roles within their communities. These entrenched beliefs not only perpetuate gender inequality but also deprive the country of the valuable perspectives and contributions women can bring to public and economic life. Currently, only 5% of women in rural areas occupy leadership positions, reflecting the persistent barriers to their active participation in decision-making processes [6]. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive national awareness campaigns that confront harmful stereotypes while promoting gender equality. Equally important is the engagement of male allies and community leaders in advocating for women's rights and participation. An effective example is CARE Laos' Gender Equality in Action (GEA) project, which successfully trained 300 men as advocates for gender equality. This initiative led to increased acceptance of women in leadership positions and greater involvement of women in community decision-making forums.

5. Governance

Despite the Lao government's commitment to promoting gender equality through frameworks such as the National Gender Policy, implementation challenges persist, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Key obstacles include insufficient budget allocations, limited technical capacity, and weak enforcement mechanisms, which collectively undermine the policy's effectiveness. Moreover, the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks hampers efforts to track the progress and impact of gender equality initiatives [2]. Strengthening these

mechanisms is crucial to ensuring accountability, informing evidence-based adjustments, and achieving more inclusive development outcomes. Increasing financial and human resources for rural-focused initiatives can further bridge gaps between national policy intentions and community-level realities. An instructive example is Nepal's community-driven monitoring model, which actively involves local stakeholders in assessing the implementation of gender programs. This participatory approach has improved transparency, local ownership, and policy responsiveness, offering a practical and replicable framework that Lao PDR could adapt to enhance governance effectiveness.

6. Policy Options and Recommendations

The Parliament may wish to consider the following based on the examples below:

- Enhancing rural education, mobile schools and scholarships for girls. Vocational training tailored to labor market needs can boost youth employability. Cambodia's Skills Development Program increased youth employment by 35% through demand-driven vocational training, illustrating the benefits of such alignment.
- Improving microfinance accessibility by reducing collateral requirements and enhancing financial literacy. Vietnam's success in empowering women entrepreneurs through financial literacy initiatives offers valuable lessons for Lao PDR.
- Expanding gender equality campaigns and integrating programs like HeForShe to address entrenched norms. Indonesia's "Boys Don't Cry" campaign successfully increased girls' school enrollment by challenging restrictive gender norms).
- Introducing quotas for women and youth in leadership roles and offering capacity-building programs to enhance inclusivity. Nepal's training of 2,000 women for community leadership roles has strengthened governance and community resilience.

7. Conclusion

Empowering women and youth is not only a matter of social justice but a strategic imperative for Lao PDR's long-term sustainable development. Addressing the systemic barriers, they face in education, economic participation, and leadership is essential to unlocking the country's full socioeconomic potential. By prioritizing inclusive education policies, expanding economic opportunities, and strengthening governance reforms, Lao PDR can foster equitable and resilient growth. The active involvement of the Lao Parliament is critical in advancing these priorities—through enacting inclusive legislation, allocating sufficient resources, and establishing productive partnerships with civil society and international organizations. Strong political leadership, combined with effective implementation and local engagement, will be key to achieving meaningful and lasting change. Ultimately, investing in women and youth is both a moral obligation and a pragmatic strategy to build a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future for all citizens of Lao PDR.

Reference

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