GENDER ANALYSIS (SUMMARY)

A. Progress and Key Challenges

1. The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) ranks 88 on the gender-related development index (GDI) and 122 on the human development index (HDI).

Government policies combined with rapid economic modernization have supported the steady advancement of women’s status in the Lao PDR, particularly in urban areas. Almost 25% of representative in the National Assembly are women—a proportion that compares favorably with the the People’s Republic of China and Viet Nam. However, significant inequalities persist along rural–urban lines, geographic areas (north, center, south) and among ethnic groups, within which gender disparities and challenges are accentuated. Households headed by women represent 5%–10% of the population and are worse off. Key issues of concern include (i) high rate of maternal mortality at 405 deaths per 100,000 live births; (ii) lack of access to reproductive health services; (iii) gender disparity at all levels of education; and (iv) limited access to training, financing, and opportunities for economic advancement.

2. Education. The country has made progress in diminishing gender gaps in education, but remains far from reaching the education-related MDGs. Fewer girls than boys are enrolled at all levels and gaps increase at each education stage, highlighting that girls still face challenges in completing a full cycle of education to the tertiary level. Differences between urban and rural areas are significant, with disparities highest in the north and in rural remote, off-road, and ethnic areas, where girls comprise a higher proportion of those who have never attended school. Completion is also a gender issue. Lack of complete primary schools and availability of lower secondary schools within commutable distance contribute to high drop-out rates and low participation of girls beyond primary as girls are less likely than boys to walk long distances to study at a complete school or to attend as a boarder. More Lao women (70%) are illiterate than men (85%), with marked differences in rural areas (women 54% and men 81%). About 40% of all students in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are female; but this varies significantly by level and subject. In 2008/09, fewer than 30% of TVET teachers were female and of the 43 directors of TVET institutes, only 5 were women. The gender ratio of TVET teachers varies across subject areas, mirroring gender segregation in the labor market and in the student population. Key education challenges for girls include reducing distance to schools, improving gender responsiveness of teaching and learning materials, ensuring safe school environments, and addressing linguistic barriers and cultural attitudes to girls’ education.

3. Health and water and sanitation. Lao PDR’s maternal mortality rate is still among the highest in the world, at 405 deaths per 100,000 live births. Only about 21.1% of births are delivered by a skilled birth attendant and 28% of women obtain antenatal care. Education, wealth, and ethnicity are important predictors of skilled attendance at delivery and use of antenatal care. Lack of a skilled birth attendant at delivery, access to basic emergency obstetric care and hospitals, poor nutritional status of women, and food taboos during pregnancy are key

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3 Enrolment rate data from 2009/10 school year: primary (girls 91.7%, boys 93.7%), secondary (girls 55.5%, boys 64.4%) and upper secondary (girls 30.4%, boys 37.3%).
4 At the primary level, the net enrollment ratio for girls ranges from 49% in rural areas without road access to 72.2% in rural areas with road access and to 90.5% in urban areas.
5 Thirty-two percent of girls are expected to drop out before completing primary schooling; girls account for only 41% of secondary school enrolment, with half of those entering lower secondary expected to drop out before completing upper secondary.
factors contributing to the high maternal mortality rate. Early marriage and pregnancy place young women at risk, and access to family planning and reproductive health services remains limited. While the Lao PDR remains a low prevalence country for HIV/AIDS, the disease seems to be spreading more quickly among women in the 15–29 year age group. Only 23% of households in rural areas without roads have access to safe water (piped or from a protected well-water source), compared with 88% of urban households. Women are highly affected by poor access to quality water and sanitation facilities as they are primarily responsible for tasks related to household water and sanitation, taking care of sick children affected by water-borne diseases, and community environment improvements.

4. Economic empowerment. Lao women constitute more than half of the country’s agricultural workers (54%) and have one of the highest labor force participation rates in the region at 79.5%. They are traditionally responsible for family finances and food security. They are also active in the informal business sector, running about 52% of household businesses. In addition, they partly or fully own about 31% of registered businesses. An increasing number of women are also engaged in wage employment (44%, 2005), in urban areas mainly in factories producing for export (textile, garment) and in rural areas where transition into cash crops has created a number of jobs. Despite their relatively high participation in the labor force, women tend to suffer certain disadvantages. Female workers on average earn lower wages and other kinds of remuneration than male workers; differences also exist in job security, types of work, and working conditions. Lack of literacy, limited access to credit and technical resources, and cumbersome formal registration procedures push women into small-scale enterprises in the informal sector and limit the growth of their businesses in the formal sector. Women’s ability to shift from subsistence agriculture to market-oriented production is hampered by limited access to extension services, productivity enhancement technology, market information, and credit. Lower educational attainment means that women often do not have the higher credentials to secure well-paid jobs in emerging markets. In addition, women’s higher reproductive and household work burden and consequent time poverty curtail their income-earning potential. Greater economic integration of the Lao PDR and the southeast Asian region has increased women’s migration between countries in search of employment, which has increased women’s vulnerability to risks associated with illegal migration, trafficking, HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation, and violence.

5. Public decision-making: With women comprising 25% of representative in the National Assembly, the Lao PDR has one of the highest proportions of women in parliament in the region. However, women remain underrepresented in senior and decision-making positions in the government: only two female ministers and a third woman in an equivalent position (President of Lao Women’s Union), one woman vice minister, and five equivalent positions filled by women. Progress in women’s representation in the central government has not filtered down to provincial and local governing bodies, which are mostly made up of men. In 2008, 40% of the country’s 109,359 civil servants were women. Disproportionately few women advance to senior positions even though most male and female civil servants have similar educational qualifications.

6. Gender-based violence: Prevalence of domestic violence is widespread with about 1 in 5 reporting physical abuse and 1 in 3 reporting emotional abuse. Limited support services (legal, health, police) and legal framework and social pressures prioritize family unity over protection.

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8 At the provincial level, there are no female governors and only one woman vice-governor. In 2009 there were only 148 female village chiefs out a total of 8,726 (1.7%), and 863 female deputy village chiefs out of 17,128 (5%).
Sexual violence or rape of a spouse is not considered a crime. Violence legislation is lacking, for example, the Law on Development and Protection of Women (2004) mentions domestic violence but stops short of suggesting it can be penalized.

B. Government’s Gender Strategy

7. The Lao legal and policy framework for the promotion of gender equality includes the Constitution and various specific gender-related laws. As stipulated in the revised Constitution of 2003 and other laws, women and men have equal rights in all spheres: political, social-cultural, and family. The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy—the government’s national development plan—emphasizes gender as a crosscutting priority. Several laws have been introduced or revised to guarantee women’s rights: the 2004 Law on Development and Protection of Women designed to protect women’s rights and interests and to ensure equality between women and men, the 2005 amendment of the Penal Law (article 177) criminalizing discrimination against women, a 2006 revision of the Labor Law, and the 2009 revised Family Law. The National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) is currently drafting the 2nd National Strategy for the Advancement of Women for 2011–2015, which includes specific gender targets for a range of sectors. The institutional framework includes the Lao Women's Union (LWU) and NCAW. NCAW is responsible for formulating and implementing national policy for the advancement of women and mainstreaming gender in all sectors, with units established across ministries and at provincial and administrative levels, creating a broad network of gender focal points. However, NCAW lacks critical capacity, resources, and institutional support to carry out its mandate. The Lao Women’s Union is mandated to protect women’s rights and interests, promotes and monitors the implementation of women’s development programs, and acts as a link between the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, the government, and Lao women from urban and rural areas.

C. ADB’s Experience

8. Good progress has been made in mainstreaming gender through project-specific gender action plans, targets, and indicators that have promoted women’s participation, empowerment, and access to benefits in a range of sectors. In the education sector, projects addressed gender disparities and improving girls access and participation in schooling by constructing schools in underserved locations, targeting girls enrolment, constructing day-care centers to help relieve girls’ from child care duties so they can attend school, providing remedial programs, developing gender-responsive curricula, increasing recruitment and training women teacher, and increasing community awareness on girls’ education. These features all supported transition of girls from primary to lower secondary education, enhanced quality and relevance of education for girls, and increased enrolment and retention rates in poor and ethnic minority areas. The health programs supported access of poor ethnic women to health services by improving the quality of reproductive services. Key strategies included upgrading health facilities, improving the skills and qualifications of female health staff, ensuring culturally appropriate information, education and communication activities and piloting a health equity fund to increase poor women’s access to emergency obstetric services. The water and sanitation projects addressed women’s work burdens, improved women’s and their families’ health and well-being, and supported their participation in decision making related to local water and sanitation infrastructure investments and training for increasing their employment potential in technical and leadership positions in water utilities and authorities. In the agriculture sector, projects have supported women’s income-earning potential through training on increasing farm productivity, managing livestock enterprises, developing tools to market their products, and improving access to credit and savings programs. In addition, ADB has been providing capacity development support to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry focused on strengthening the institutional setup; developing
gender-sensitive strategy, and building capacity for gender analysis and gender integrated planning among agriculture sector personnel, thus impacting the nature and amount of investment provided for women farmers.

D. ADB’s Gender Strategy

Under the CPS, 2012–2016, ADB will make the following investments in gender equity in the Lao PDR:

(i) **Education.** ADB will contribute to gender equality results in the secondary and TVET sectors. Key interventions in secondary education will address access and equity issues through student incentive schemes, gender sensitive curriculum development, and increasing female teacher recruitment and deployment. Strategies in TVET will support greater alignment of women’s skills to labor market needs, women’s access to training in nontraditional fields and public–private partnerships to mobilize entrepreneurs to employ women in nontraditional trades.

(ii) **Energy.** Projects will be designed to extend low-cost sustainable energy services to poor women and marginalized groups, support women’s energy needs, and increase women’s access to income-earning opportunities from the provision of electricity.

(iii) **Water supply and sanitation and urban sector development.** Gender equity issues will be promoted through improved access to urban basic services and public health for women. Projects will (a) promote women’s participation in decision-making and ensure that women’s needs are integrated in planning local priority infrastructure and selection of sanitation technology through women’s participation in civic groups and local governance institutions; and (b) promote women’s economic empowerment through access to employment (in water utilities, civil works, maintenance) access to credit and livelihood enhancement activities (sanitation schemes, corridor town development activities).

(iv) **Agriculture and natural resources management.** Given women’s significant contribution to rural agriculture, ADB strategies in the sector underscore the linkages between women’s economic empowerment and poverty reduction, and include actions to increase women’s access to training and inputs related to productivity enhancement and diversification interventions, and increased access to markets and financial services.

(v) **Trade and industry:** SME development programs will support policy reform to create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs and increase their access to a range of resources, including finance and training.

(vi) **Transport:** ADB strategies in the sector will ensure gender inclusive road infrastructure development, which will support women’s increased access to essential services and markets through improved roads and rural and urban connectivity, as well as employment for women in civil and maintenance works and measures to increase women’s engagement in the transport sector.

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9  Basic Education Sector Development Project, the Secondary Education Sector Development Project, and Strengthening TVET Project II.
11  The GMS Corridor Town Development, the Urban Environment Improvement projects, and the Water and Sanitation Program.
13  Second Generation Private Sector and SME Development programs.
14  For example, the proposed Vientiane Sustainable Urban Transport Project.