

KEY POINTS

- In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, women take on five times more unpaid domestic and care work than men, limiting their opportunity to learn, earn, travel, rest, and expand their life choices.
- Exposure to gender awareness training by various ethnic groups contributes to recognizing unpaid care work, influencing changes in the division of labor.
- Uneven standards, inflexible schedules, and accessibility constraints due to limited capacity deter parents from seeking services from government-supported preschools.
- Unpaid care work is a burden particularly for women from vulnerable groups. With fewer alternatives, they are at greater risk of being caught in an intergenerational cycle of poverty.
- While infrastructure development and increased incomes have reduced women's time spent on household work, entrenched gender norms have limited the anticipated redistribution of responsibilities that improved infrastructure might have stimulated.

Exploring the Gender Dimensions of Unpaid Care Work in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

INTRODUCTION

Globally, women allocate more time to paid and unpaid work than men. While men are engaged largely in paid work, the bulk of unpaid work falls on the shoulders of women.¹ It has been observed that unpaid care and domestic work consumes twice as much time for women globally as it does for men.² Unpaid work refers to economic activities that are not directly remunerated, including tasks undertaken in a household or family business, or fetching water and fuelwood. Meanwhile, unpaid care work refers to household work such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and the direct care or nurturing of children, the elderly, and the sick. Paid care work refers to occupations where workers provide care directly or indirectly to others, including work done by nurses, childminders, domestic workers, cooks, and cleaners, both in public settings and in private homes.³

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is not an exception to the global phenomenon of women shouldering a disproportionately higher burden of unpaid work and unpaid care work. According to the country's 2015 population and housing census, 61% of women in the labor force worked as unpaid family workers, compared to only 26% of men, even though women's labor force participation is on par with men (70.8% for women and 67.6% for men).⁴

Encouraging women's labor force participation is an important aspect of the Government of the Lao PDR's socioeconomic development plan (NSED 2016–2020); the National Strategy Plan for Gender Equality (2016–2025); and the National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2016–2020). Gender equality in access to education and other services is highlighted in the national socioeconomic and gender equality development plans, while the National Action Plan for Gender Equality also focuses on women's employment and gender statistics. The Lao Women's Union Development Plan (2016–2020) emphasizes promoting women's small-scale businesses for poverty reduction and protecting the

¹ Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2015. *Balancing the Burden? Desk Review of Women's Time Poverty and Infrastructure in Asia and the Pacific*. Manila.

² United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). 2015. *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights*. UN Women: United States.

³ ADB and UN Women. 2018. *Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Baseline and Pathways for Transformative Change by 2030*. Bangkok.

⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau. 2015. *Results of Population and Housing Census 2015*. Vientiane.

rights of women and children. However, none of these plans refer to women's unpaid work or unpaid care work and the importance of reducing this workload to support women's effective participation in the labor force.

Women in the Lao PDR take on heavy unpaid workloads, especially fetching water and collecting firewood, and in some villages, pounding rice. The amount of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is five times higher among women when compared to men. Recent infrastructural developments have improved roads, allowed greater access to water and electricity and the establishment of preschools, and has lessened the time spent by women in providing unpaid domestic work. Further, increased cash income through greater opportunities for market-related activities has allowed households to buy labor-saving devices including water pumps, refrigerators, washing machines, and rice cookers.

In spite of some reduction in the total hours spent on domestic work, the gender gap in the time devoted to unpaid domestic and care work remains significant. Women's childcare responsibilities, for instance, have barely decreased despite these time-saving advantages. Parents cannot make full use of preschools because of the scarcity of teachers, perceived poor quality, nonuniformity of service delivery across preschools, and unaffordable preschool fee structures.

This brief is based on the findings of a 2018 Asian Development Bank (ADB) study, in collaboration with the Lao Women's Union, entitled *Women's Unpaid Work in the Lao PDR: Case Studies in Luang Namtha, Vientiane, and Champasak Provinces*. It aimed to identify changes in the extent and nature of unpaid work as well as the factors influencing these changes to make policy and program recommendations.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS FINDINGS

The 2018 ADB-commissioned study focused on six villages and three provinces. It consisted of qualitative research that was informed by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The study reported on the impact of poverty on those balancing paid and unpaid work, particularly in households where (i) women were heads of households; (ii) young children resided; (iii) older women assumed care roles; (iv) migrant workers, men and women, sent remittances; and (v) family members with disabilities required constant support.

Many of the coping strategies cited continue to perpetuate gender-based stereotypes, for example by allowing girls to leave school, and will continue to limit the long-term capacity of women to contribute to household, communal, and national economic growth. The study found these groups to be vulnerable since they have few alternatives when it comes to balancing the demands of unpaid work, including care work, alongside earning an income.

“My husband can help with household work such as feeding our child. But whenever he does this, he complains because he is worried about getting late for work if someone hires him. He can also help in cooking, but he does not like to do this because it is women's work. However, when I am extremely busy, he will do it. I believe that many women do not want husbands to cook because the villagers will say that the wives are lazy.”

—K, 36 years old, from Boungphao Village, Vientiane Province

One characteristic shared by all of these groups was their greater risk of being caught in an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

In the Lao PDR, men do perform some unpaid care work activities, but their roles are limited due to social norms and paid work obligations. As a result, entrenched social norms regarding domestic work continue to be observed in households where men regularly work outside of the home. This is particularly for men who have full-time employment in offices and factories. For these households, women do all the unpaid care work, since the household is organized around the primary income-generating activity, and unpaid household work is considered to be of secondary importance. The study also found farm work prioritized ahead of household and community work because of its flexibility, while paid jobs maintained prominence above all unpaid work.

There are regional and ethnic differences in household practices and attitudes toward unpaid care work. For example, study respondents in Luang Namtha province noted that some ethnic groups such as the Hmong used to follow a strict gender division of labor, with women rarely being allowed to interact with men in activities such as public decision-making and sharing meals. However, exposure to other ethnic groups as well as various development interventions, including participation in gender training, have contributed to a better understanding and recognition of unpaid care work and influenced a change in the division of labor among Hmong men. In general, awareness about gender equality was noted to have increased among all respondents.

The first step in redistributing unpaid care work is to tackle gender norms between women and men.⁵ Another reason why the redistribution of women's unpaid care work has not progressed may be attributed to the entrenched gender norms that perpetuate the belief that reproductive work is solely the responsibility of women. The research findings offer insight into the traditional, cultural, and socioeconomic factors that define and challenge the gender-based norms and stereotypes that perpetuate the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work among men and women in the Lao PDR.

⁵ G. Ferrant, L. Pesando, and K. Nowacka. 2014. *Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labour Outcomes*. OECD Development Centre.

KEY GENDER ISSUES

Gendered social norms driving women's unequal share of the unpaid care workload. Although time spent on unpaid care work in the study area had been reduced due to improved infrastructure and household incomes, there was little evidence that a redistribution of roles and responsibilities for unpaid work had been achieved. While the women respondents observed some reduction in time spent on unpaid care work, they confirmed that they still work harder than men, leading to adverse health outcomes. Women's hard work is recognized to a certain extent by the community.

Most women and men agree that the burden of household work should be reduced to divert more available time for participation in paid and productive work. However, this was most often linked to a preference for increased incomes rather than out of concerns of inequity. While women want men to share care work in the household, aside from the Hmong men in Luang Namtha, few men respondents expressed a willingness to share the workload.

Although the men said they would like women to take up more paid work, there was no recognition that this shift might require a rebalancing of roles in the household. Instead, men perceived household work to be a waste of time and preferred not to participate in domestic work or household chores.

Migration and the double burden of care work on the elderly. Women and men migrate in search of decent work, leaving both the elderly and young behind. While remittances provide financial support to family members left behind, the burden of care work is often doubled for grandparents, for example, who extend their caregiving and household responsibilities to include the needs of their grandchildren.

Caring for extended family members places an additional time burden on the capacity for individuals to seek and secure paid employment. The study found that in instances where households assumed responsibility for extended family members, there was a heightened demand for additional social services that might alleviate the time burden, such as schools and preschools.

This additional care burden was clear in the study communities as poverty led elderly members to continue to work. This finding points to the need to assess the unpaid care workload of women of all ages.

“My income decreased after my husband died and people stopped communicating with me. Few people invite me to weddings or house ceremonies; they invite my son-in-law instead of me. The community does not invite me to participate in any project or event and does not give an explanation for this. I feel excluded from the community and from society.”

—T, 59 years old, from Pakmee Village, Vientiane Province

Heavier workloads and social restrictions on women in vulnerable groups. Women-headed households and other vulnerable groups of women undertake the same amount of domestic work as women in men-headed households. However, as many vulnerable women must also pursue paid work, their workload is considerably increased. They do not have anyone to rely on except, in some instances, extended family members or their parents. Women-headed households struggle as a result of the limited paid work opportunities and against the social stigma and restrictions on their freedom of movement and association.

Not only do women-headed households experience difficulty when asking for help, they are also considered to be of lower social status. The study found that widows and single mothers were considered spiritually inferior to men, and thus unable to conduct spiritual ceremonies. Traditional cultural practices make it difficult for women heads of households to be recognized as independent since they cannot carry out these ceremonies by themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Achieving gender equality in unpaid work can lead to an average increase of 30% in per capita income in Asian countries within one generation.⁶ Placing women at the center of unpaid work, thereby restricting their participation in market-related work, is a suboptimal use of the labor force.⁷ Limiting labor force participation in this way leads to lower wages for women and an increased likelihood of intergenerational poverty, affecting the socioeconomic growth and prosperity of the country.⁸ The following recommendations are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- (i) **Recognize women's unpaid care work by bringing the issue into the national policy debate (SDG 5, Target 5.4).** Women's unpaid care work and its contribution to the economy and society must be explicitly acknowledged.

⁵ G. Ferrant, L. Pesando, and K. Nowacka. 2014. *Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labour Outcomes*. OECD Development Centre.

⁶ ADB. 2015. *Women in the Workforce: An Unmet Potential in Asia and the Pacific*. Manila.

⁷ I. Hirway. 2015. *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Linkages and their Implications*. Working Paper No. 838. Levy Economics Institute of Bard College.

⁸ ADB. 2015. *Balancing the Burden? Desk Review of Women's Time Poverty and Infrastructure in Asia and the Pacific*. Manila; and OECD. 2016. *East Asia and the Pacific SIGI Regional Report*. Paris.

It is essential that development practitioners implement approaches that ensure both women and men have equal opportunities to access, participate in, and benefit from all development investments. This includes recognition of the different roles played by women and men, and the integration of creative solutions to rebalance unpaid care work between men and women.

Social and economic development policies must recognize that women have time barriers in access to education, healthcare, markets, and information resources that could contribute to poverty reduction and livelihood improvements for women and their families. In attempting to recalibrate unpaid care work in the Lao PDR and informed by the experiences of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the government could take steps to hold broad-based “care” dialogues with multi-disciplinary partners to bring unpaid care work into the public policy debate and enrich data collection and analysis.⁹

Concurrently, public policy could be informed through better identifying, collecting, and analyzing time-use data to assess infrastructure and other public service solutions to these challenges.

- (ii) **Recognize the important role of social protection and welfare programs in responding to the economic impacts of unpaid care work on poor and vulnerable households (SDG 1, Target 1.3; SDG 5, Target 5.4).** Many vulnerable groups of women are locked in a cycle of intergenerational poverty due to their inability to substitute paid for unpaid work.

This is further exacerbated by cultural norms and biases as well as intersectionalities between sex, age, disability, class, ethnicity, and household status. For individuals to benefit from policy initiatives intended to decrease unpaid care work, they must first build a secure basis for their livelihood.

“We have seen other women in the village undertaking many activities to earn income and we want to do the same, but we do not have the necessary skills and have to look after our young children most of the time.”

—Feedback from participants of a focus group discussion for women with children under 10 years old at Thongkalong Village, Champasak Province

“Being a woman head of household is difficult. Most villagers walk to the rubber field at night. Women cannot go to tap rubber at night alone. This affects their income. Low income leads to lack of food, clothes, and assets. The situation of women-headed households is different from households headed by men. In addition, women cannot do spiritual ceremonies by themselves because tradition does not allow it. Many women have to ask a man to help in conducting traditional events.”

—Village head from Hadyao Village, Namtha District, Luang Namtha Province

It is important to put in place social protection and welfare policies that acknowledge the different needs and experiences of poor households, men, and women. The Lao PDR does not offer social security programs to persons with disabilities or to the elderly. While existing social security schemes include pensions, only contributing members are eligible and universal access is not applicable.

Although social security does offer support for members who are unable to work due to work-related injuries and illnesses, the duration of this support is only up to 6 months.

- (iii) **Reduce unpaid care work through infrastructure development (SDG 2, Target 2.3; SDG 5, Target 5.4; SDG 7, Target 7.1; SDG 9, Target 9.1; SDG 11, Target 11.2).** Multilateral development partners are striving to support the delivery of physical infrastructure and public services that can alleviate some of the pressures associated with unpaid care work, particularly in poor rural settings.

Infrastructure investments such as water supply, road development, and provision of affordable electricity should be developed with the goal of reducing and rebalancing the time poverty associated with unpaid care work. This reorientation could empower women to achieve a better balance between competing pressures from paid and unpaid work while raising awareness around redistributing roles and responsibilities at the household level.

The 8th NSEDP has included in its targets gender equality in access to basic infrastructure such as electricity, roads, and markets.¹⁰ These targets should be central to infrastructure development plans such that projects would reduce women’s time poverty from fetching water, washing clothes, bringing children to school, and cooking.

⁹ UN Women. 2018. *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. UN Women: United States.

¹⁰ Government of the Lao PDR. 2016. *National Socioeconomic Development Plan 2016–2020*. p. 156.

- (iv) **Reduce unpaid care work through labor-saving technologies (SDG 5, Targets 5.4 and 5b; SDG 8, Target 8.2; SDG 9, Targets 9.2 and 9.4).** The study found that households with higher incomes could purchase labor-saving devices to decrease unpaid domestic work (e.g., washing machines, refrigerators, electric rice cookers, LPG stoves, and water pumps), while motorbikes have decreased the time spent in traveling to the market and the field. However, these all come at a cost.

To truly shift the burden of unpaid work, labor-saving devices should be affordable and accessible to the people who need them most: women-headed households, poor households, young couples, and the elderly. Consideration should be given to the design of a social protection program such as special credit schemes or subsidies by public and private sector actors so low-income households might avail of such devices. Further research and development on cost-effective labor-saving devices should be encouraged.

Time-saving technologies such as mobile finance and market price validation applications could be considered. Such technologies have not yet been the focus of Lao policy dialogue on social protection or the rebalancing of unpaid care work.

- (v) **Improve women's access to wage or paid employment (SDG 8, Targets 8.3 and 8.5).** To facilitate change in gender norms that characterize women to be more adept or proficient at unpaid care work, opportunities for women to be engaged in paid work must be increased through target outreach, communication, and recruitment campaigns.

Without public awareness campaigns presenting the livelihood opportunities available to both men and women, there are fewer incentives for households to invest in labor savings or labor sharing to optimize their collective earnings and time management.

Further, without communities recognizing the economic productive capacity of women in a range of livelihood areas, it will be challenging to effect a rebalancing of roles and responsibilities in both households and communities.

- (vi) **Strengthen Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and introduce a new childcare policy (SDG 4, Target 4.2; SDG 5, Target 5.4).** Although ECEC programs are acknowledged for playing an integral role in reducing unpaid care work, their capacity to deliver appropriate, consistent and responsive services in the Lao PDR requires further policy attention.

The study found that even when unpaid domestic work decreased, childcare work did not. There is a high demand

among women with small children to access quality and affordable early childcare services. However, parents in the study areas are lacking confidence in the care and quality of the ECECs available to them.

UN Women's recommendations for gender equality in the UN's 2030 Agenda noted that: "Redistributing unpaid care and domestic work means providing alternatives to family care by making available services that offer accessible, affordable, quality care providing adequate working conditions for paid care workers, and ensuring greater sharing of care responsibilities by men" (footnote 4).

A high-quality, child-centered ECEC program in addition to an early-childhood education program, was observed to be essential for increasing women's formal labor participation rates in the study communities of the Lao PDR.

- (vii) **Improve and diversify partnerships with the private sector and other public and private stakeholders (SDG 1, Target 1.4; SDG 5, Target 5.4).** In instances where the government is unable to secure the provision of services intended to alleviate the burden of unpaid work, innovative partnerships could be explored by engaging private companies, corporations, employers, and local government officials to provide support services such as water, energy, and childcare to households.

Entering into dialogue with these stakeholders and forging innovative and mutually beneficial partnerships with the private sector, civil society, local government, schools, health sector, and local community-based groups can significantly contribute to identifying innovative responses to addressing the challenges of balancing unpaid and paid work.

"My wife and I go to the rubber field together at 2:00 am every day. During this time, my fifth son looks after his younger brother and sister. At 7:00 am, he takes them to their grandparents' house before going to school. My parents take care of my children until 8:00 am, when we go to pick them up. Some days, when it rains during the day, we have to bring our younger children to the field with us since we need to put vinegar in the rubber sap to make it firm. We do not send our youngest children to pre-school because we do not have the money to pay the school fees."

—P, 46 years old, from Hadyao Village, Luang Namtha Province

CONCLUSION

In the Lao PDR, women continue to shoulder a considerable proportion of unpaid care work compared to men. For women, the time consumed by unpaid care work is five times greater than it is for men. In areas where income-generating activities are increasing, both women and men are taking up more paid work than before. With extra income and government infrastructure projects such as water supply systems, construction of health centers, schools and preschools, installation of electricity services, establishment of markets, and road networks, some household tasks (including fetching water and cooking with firewood) have been reduced.

The 2018 ADB-commissioned study found that unpaid work does not decrease with a rise in income. On the contrary, in some instances, unpaid domestic work increased with the rise in the standard of living and higher demands from other family members as well as social commitments. The problem stemmed from women having little flexibility to control the number of hours they devoted to unpaid care work. A rigid division of labor with respect to household responsibilities affects women's capacity to engage in market-related work, learning, socializing, and community activities. Although women's participation in community work appears to improve their access to decision-making, the disproportionate allocation of unpaid care work continues to disadvantage women, and by extension their families, from economic opportunities.

In many cases, development projects in the Lao PDR have led to some reduction in unpaid care work through infrastructure development and increased access to household appliances. While these changes have alleviated some pressures associated with unpaid care work, there is little acknowledgement that the unequal gender division of labor restricts women's participation in paid work. While a primary objective of these development projects was to support economic growth through improved village to market links, they lacked specific actions to address the different needs and opportunities of men and women with respect to balancing paid and unpaid work.

The lack of recognition for unpaid care work continues to pose a problem to women's personal and economic (public) growth and prosperity in the Lao PDR. Pervasive gendered social norms impact the capacity of individuals, both men and women, to contemplate and rationalize a recalibration or redistribution of unpaid care work. Limited understanding of the influence of gender-based stereotypes among both women and men perpetuates the idea that unpaid care work is a woman's responsibility, and social norms make it difficult to challenge this belief. Despite the understanding among women and men that unpaid care work should be reduced, there is little encouragement for redistribution within policy dialogue, community norms, or in practical terms, at the household level.

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