




**IN THE SHADOWS OF
POWER:**

**WOMEN CONFRONTING PATRIARCHY
IN LAOS**

JOINT CIVIL SOCIETY CEDAW REPORT



Joint Civil Society CEDAW Report to inform the List of Issues to be considered by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), during the Pre-Sessional Working Group for its 88th Session

SUBMISSION BY

Manushya Foundation x Power By Keyboard



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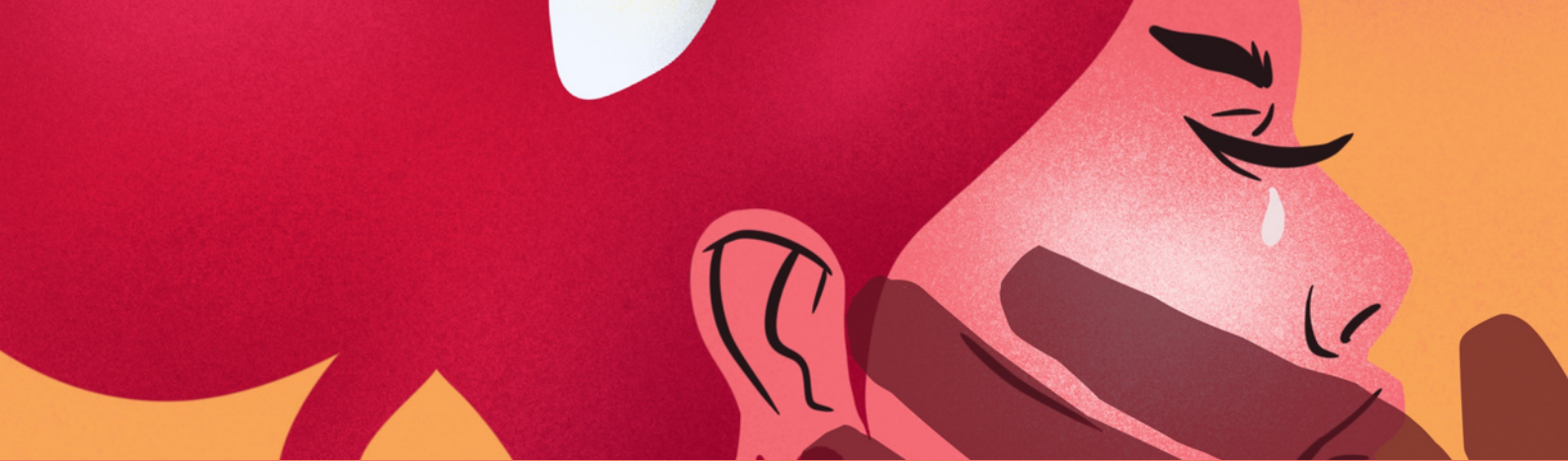
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In the Shadows of Power: Women Confronting Patriarchy in Laos



Joint Civil Society CEDAW Report to inform the List of Issues to be considered by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), during the Pre-Sessional Working Group for its 88th Session



#CEDAWLAOS



A. INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this Parallel Report is to assist the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (88 Pre-Sessional Working Group, 30 Oct 2023 - 3 Nov 2023) in its review of the Lao People Democratic Republic's upcoming Periodic Report on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Lao PDR signed the CEDAW on 17 July 1980 and ratified it on 14 August 1981.
2. [Manushya Foundation](#) was founded in 2017 as an Intersectional Feminist organization reinforcing the power of Humans, in particular, local communities and women human rights defenders to be at the heart of decision-making processes that concern them and to speak truth to power. Manushya defends local communities and seeks justice with them before the United Nations, focusing on women's rights and gender equality, digital rights, and climate & environmental issues.¹
3. [Power by Keyboard](#) (ຂັບເຄື່ອນດ້ວຍຄືບອດ) was created by pro-democracy youth in March 2022 and advocates for true democracy while criticizing Lao PDR's growing dependency on China. It focuses on human rights, including China's dominant influence on investments in Lao PDR and education rights for Lao youth. The page also addresses environmental concerns and fiercely supports LGBTQI+ rights in Lao PDR.²
4. The comprehensive analysis and data presented in this report are a direct result of the data collection undertaken on the ground, diligent monitoring and substantial efforts by Manushya Foundation and Power by Keyboard, who are strongly dedicated to advancing women's rights and the state of human rights in Lao PDR.

B. ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ARTICLES

Article 1: Definition of discrimination

5. The Lao constitution,³ in Articles 35 and 37, establishes the principle of equality before the law for all Lao citizens, irrespective of their gender, beliefs, education, or social status, ensuring they enjoy equal economic, social, and cultural rights. Nevertheless, the Lao constitution does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on all grounds. The sole reference to discrimination prevention is found in Article 8, pertaining to the prohibition of discrimination among ethnic groups.
6. Furthermore, the Lao constitution fails to explicitly recognize the equality of the LGBTQI+ community under the law, as it does not state that all Lao citizens are equal in the eyes of the law, irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Article 37 unambiguously excludes LGBTQI+ individuals by specifying that only 'both genders' enjoy economic, social, and cultural rights.



7. Within the legal framework, the Lao penal code⁴ explicitly outlaws discrimination against women in Article 224 which provides that any individual who discriminates against women or hinders their participation in political, economic, scientific, socio-cultural, or family activities based on gender can face legal prosecution.

8. Questions

- Can the State party provide updates on recent or contemplated efforts to review and amend existing anti-discrimination laws to explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGIE) as a protected category, ensuring that discrimination based on SOGIE is prohibited in all areas of life, including employment, education, healthcare, and public services, in line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR?
- Can the Lao government provide information on any ongoing or planned efforts to review and amend the constitution to include explicit provisions that prohibit discrimination against women on all grounds, ensuring gender equality and protection of women's rights are constitutionally enshrined?

Article 2: Policy measures to be undertaken to eliminate discrimination

9. The Lao government's commitment to CEDAW compliance led to the 2019 Law on Gender Equality, which establishes a comprehensive framework for promoting gender equality in education, employment, healthcare, and politics. It addresses women's rights issues, explicitly prohibits gender-based discrimination, and serves as a legal foundation for combating such discrimination.
10. Nevertheless, as is the case for many other areas in Lao PDR, a significant challenge lies in the disparity between the law and its practical enforcement. Particularly in rural areas, local communities may not be fully aware of their legal rights due, but not limited to: restricted access to information, geographical isolation and language and literacy barriers. It is crucial to enhance awareness campaigns and legal literacy programs to bridge this gap. Additionally, deeply ingrained sociocultural norms and traditional gender roles persist in Lao society, which are impeding the effective implementation of gender equality initiatives by perpetuating discriminatory biases.



11. Questions

- What steps has the government taken to develop and implement comprehensive legal awareness programs that educate citizens, especially those in rural areas, about their rights under gender equality laws, in accordance with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR?
- How does the Lao government intend to provide regular training for judges, lawyers, and law enforcement officials on gender equality laws and their effective enforcement to ensure that legal professionals are well-informed and sensitive to gender-related issues?

Article 3: Guarantee of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms

12. In its CEDAW report, the Lao government commented on the issue of establishing a national human rights institution (NHRI), in line with the 1993 Paris Principles. The government stated that it is not presently prepared to establish such an institution, citing its inconsistency with the “current realities in Lao PDR.”⁵ However, the government did not provide further information on which specific current realities in the country prevent the establishment of an NHRI. Moreover, the Lao government has implemented restrictive measures on the activities of Non-Profit Associations, as illustrated by Decree No. 238 enacted in November 2017.⁶ This decree grants extensive and arbitrary powers to Lao authorities, making it difficult for civil society organizations to thrive. It criminalizes human rights groups, imposes activity limitations, restricts access to foreign funding, allows group dissolution without appeal, and criminalizes unregistered associations.
13. As a result, civil society in Lao PDR faces significant constraints and operates under a climate of fear, contradicting the government's claim that there are no restrictions on the activities of NPAs operating within Lao PDR's legal framework. This is in addition to the ever-growing curtailment of media freedoms in Lao PDR, which creates obstacles to accessing information and renders the existence of a free and independent civil society in the country virtually nonexistent.⁷
14. The diminishing civic space and constraints on freedom of expression are reflected in Lao PDR's poor ranking on the global freedom index. In 2023, Lao PDR was ranked 160 out of 180 countries in the world in terms of freedom of the press by Reporters Sans Frontières.⁸ The country also scored a meagre score of 13 out of 100 on Freedom House's Freedom of the World index, placing Lao PDR in the categories of “not free” countries.⁹ CIVICUS's close monitoring of civic space in the world gave Lao PDR a deplorable score of 7/100 and determined civic space in Lao PDR as closed.¹⁰



15. Consequently, civil society organizations working on gender issues and women human rights defenders who have mobilized to shed light on human rights infringements resulting from development projects or investments, for instance, are facing unjust obstacles or suppression. Lao authorities' routine repression of women rights defenders is incompatible with Lao PDR's commitment outlined in Article 3 of the CEDAW, which involves taking actions to "(...) ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms(...)."
16. In a specific case, on September 12, 2019, H.X was sentenced to five years in prison and fined 20 million Kip (approximately \$2,000¹¹) under Article 117 of the Lao Penal Code for anti-state propaganda.¹² This verdict stemmed from her criticism of the government in Facebook videos where she denounced deeply rooted corruption practices within the Lao government and the impact of destructive business practices on local communities.
17. In another incident, Lao woman activist L.T faced arrest on March 5, 2016, during a visit to her family in Lao PDR. She, along with two other activists, S.P and S.C, were apprehended due to their online criticism and participation in a peaceful protest at the Lao Embassy in Bangkok.¹³ Subsequently, on March 22, 2017, L.T received a 12-year prison sentence, while S.P and S.C were individually sentenced to 20 and 16 years, respectively, after being convicted of charges including treason, disseminating state propaganda, and inciting social disorder under the Lao Penal Code.¹⁴

18. Questions

- Can the Lao government clarify how the arrest and detention of Lao WHRDs like Ms. H.X and Ms. L.T are compatible with Lao PDR's commitment to Article 3 of the CEDAW?
- Could the State party outline recent efforts to review and amend any existing laws, regulations, or decrees that may unduly restrict freedom of expression and the activities of civil society organizations (CSOs) to ensure that these legal frameworks comply with international human rights standards and principles?
- Can the Lao government clarify what current realities in Lao PDR prevent it from establishing a NHRI?

Article 4: Temporary Special Measures to Achieve Equality

19. Gender equality initiatives in Lao PDR have included the implementation of national strategies and action plans as part of their approach, as shown by the various strategic plans undertaken by the government. Efforts undertaken include the implementation of the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED), the National Action Plan on Gender Equality, and the



guidelines for the Lao Women's Union (LWU), as stated by the government in Lao PDR's 2023 CEDAW report.¹⁵ In addition, various ministries have devised their gender equality strategies, intending to achieve a specific rate of women in key positions.

20. Yet, it is important to note that achieving gender equality cannot solely rely on increasing the representation of women in decision-making roles. While having more women in such positions is a positive step, it is imperative for the Lao government to undertake further efforts to ensure equal participation and the realization of women's full potential. This can be accomplished by allocating increased funding to support gender equality initiatives, enacting legislation to combat gender discrimination, raising awareness about gender equality issues, and providing robust support for women's organizations and movements.

21. Questions

- In line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR, can the State party provide updates on recent or contemplated efforts to raise awareness of gender equality among politicians and the general public, especially men, to promote an understanding of the importance of temporary special measures?
- Has the government implemented targeted measures to ensure women and girls report all cases of gender-based violence against them by conducting public awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma and fear associated with reporting gender-based violence?

Article 5: Sex Roles and Stereotyping

22. The Lao government introduced in 2015 the Law on Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Children which marked a positive step toward safeguarding women's rights.¹⁶ It criminalizes marital rape among sexual violence offences and prohibits direct and indirect discrimination against women.
23. Furthermore, in November 2019, during the Nairobi Summit on the 25th International Conference on Population and Development, the government of Lao PDR committed to a series of actions aimed at promoting women's rights and welfare. These actions primarily revolved around the goal of ending gender-based violence through the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women (2021-2026).¹⁷
24. On top of these measures, the government has undertaken various actions to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, including efforts to promote access to justice, counselling



- services, establishment of hotlines, the opening of shelters for survivors as well as providing mental health and psychosocial support.¹⁸
25. However, despite all these advances, sexual violence remains a significant and underreported issue in Lao PDR due to the persistence of gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms.
 26. A survey conducted in 2014, known as the Lao National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experiences, revealed that one in three women in relationships had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence perpetrated by their partners.¹⁹ Even more disheartening, according to a 2017 Lao Social Indicator Survey, 30% of women believed that domestic violence against women could be justified when women failed to conform to established gender norms and roles.²⁰ Many women victims of gender-based violence often lack information about available complaint mechanisms or are deterred from using them by the fear of social stigma and potential repercussions within their families.
 27. Moreover, there is a discernible pattern where gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse become more prevalent in times of crisis and instability. Both global and regional data show a substantial surge in violence against women and girls during humanitarian crises, emergencies, and economic downturns.²¹
 28. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, exacerbated this trend in Lao PDR, with instances of sexual abuse rising due to associated lockdown measures.²² For married women, the primary source of conflict leading to physical and emotional abuse is often related to the distribution of household income.²³ As financial insecurity grows, spousal tensions are more likely to rise in many households, thereby increasing the risk of emotional and physical abuse. To illustrate, aggregated data from helpline services, including the Lao Women Union (LWU), Lao Youth Union (LYU), and Vientiane Youth Center (VYC), showcased a notable 3-5 times increase in calls to the helpline for counseling services during strict lockdown periods. This increase was particularly prominent during the first half of 2022, coinciding with severe economic challenges in Lao PDR.²⁴
 29. Furthermore, indigenous women in Lao PDR are disproportionately vulnerable to gender-based violence due to the compounding discrimination of being women and ethnic minorities, in addition to entrenched patriarchal traditions that perpetuate this discrimination. The intersection of gender and racial bias creates systemic barriers when seeking help, while economic disparities further hinder their access to support services. Conflicts over land and resources, particularly affecting indigenous women because their customary land rights are not recognized, can intensify violence against them.²⁵



30. Questions

- How does the government plan to initiate community awareness campaigns to inform remote populations about available support services, their rights, and the importance of seeking help to ensure that women and girls who are victims of domestic violence, in particular those who live in remote areas, have adequate access to support?
- In accordance with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR, how does the government intend to guarantee the effective implementation of legislation on gender-based violence against women by law enforcement, judicial personnel and legal professionals to ensure they are well-equipped to enforce and apply gender-based violence legislation effectively?
- Can the State party provide an overview of any ongoing or proposed initiatives to encourage women and girls to report all cases of gender-based violence against them by conducting public awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma and fear associated with reporting gender-based violence?

Article 6: Trafficking in Person

31. Lao PDR has made some progress in its efforts to combat trafficking in person. It enacted the Anti-Trafficking Law in 2016 and established various monitoring mechanisms.²⁶ The Lao government also established the National Secretariat to the Committee on Anti-Trafficking in Persons²⁷ which focuses on enhancing the training of law enforcement officials, while the Ministry of Justice has organized training sessions for district-level police and judiciary personnel to disseminate information concerning the management of trafficking cases.²⁸ In 2018, the government intensified its efforts to combat trafficking by enacting Article 215 of the 2018 Penal Code, which criminalizes sex and labour trafficking.²⁹ Lastly, victims of trafficking in persons are now provided with direct support in Lao PDR.
32. Nevertheless, trafficking in persons remains a pervasive issue in Lao PDR as anti-trafficking organizations continue to report instances of bribery involving low-level officials who facilitate the trafficking of girls. This facilitation often includes the falsification of travel and identity documents that present underage girls as adults.³⁰
33. Moreover, the lack of employment opportunities pushes a significant number of individuals to leave the country in pursuit of improved economic prospects in neighboring countries, mainly Thailand. Once abroad, women and girls from Lao PDR are typically trafficked into various industries, such as the sex industry, domestic servitude, hospitality, retail factories, or agriculture while men and boys are predominantly trafficked into forced labor positions within the fishing, construction, or agricultural sectors.³¹



34. To illustrate, in 2018, the Lao Women's Union (LWU) reported that it provided various services, including shelter, to 52 trafficking victims. Among these victims, 47 had experienced sex and labour trafficking abroad.³²
35. Child marriages are also a significant contributor to exposing young girls to trafficking, many parents coerce their daughters, often aged 14 to 15, into marriages in exchange for financial gain. As a result, numerous women and girls who are sold as brides to foreigners become victims of sex trafficking. Despite legislative measures prohibiting child marriages, approximately one-third of women in the region are married before reaching the age of 18.³³
36. Lao women are not only trafficked when migrating from Lao PDR to other countries. Lao PDR, particularly Lao Special Economic Zones (SEZs) like the Golden Triangle SEZ, has gained notoriety for becoming an important trafficking hotspot.³⁴
37. Deceptive job advertisements, promising attractive pay and favorable working conditions, led countless Lao women to seek employment in the Golden Triangle SEZ, where they subsequently became targets of human traffickers. Once in the SEZ, they are forced to become "chat girls," utilizing social media and messaging apps to persuade potential customers to invest in or purchase shares in the infamous Kings Romans Casino.³⁵ Many of these women, upon failing to meet their sales quotas, were forcefully held and often forced into prostitution.³⁶ Further, their captors frequently seized their passports and ID cards upon arrival, rendering their escape even more difficult.³⁷ On June 14, 2022, local authorities disclosed that the police had "rescued" a total of 477 workers between May 2021 and May 2022, with around 200 of them being women who had fallen prey to human trafficking.³⁸
38. Despite the Lao government's claims of having robust mechanisms to combat human trafficking, the issue continues to plague both Lao and foreign women in the SEZ.

39. Questions

- How does the Lao government plan to ensure that traffickers are swiftly brought to justice and that investigations and prosecutions focus on dismantling trafficking networks and holding all perpetrators accountable, in line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR?
- Could the State party provide details on any recent or upcoming plans for awareness campaigns to educate communities, potential victims, and relevant stakeholders about the risks of TIP in Lao PDR?



Articles 7 and 8: Participation in political and public Life

40. Although Lao PDR has made some progress in terms of women's representation in political and public life over the decades, as reflected in the increased representation of women in the National Assembly,³⁹ it is important to note that women accounted for roughly 21.95% of the members during the 9th National Assembly's assembly in 2021, which is a sharp decrease from 2015 when women represented 27.52% of members.⁴⁰
41. The Lao government has committed to promoting gender equality through various plans and strategies, including the 9th NSEDP (2021-2025), the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021-2025), and the Guidance of LWU (2021-2025). These initiatives set specific targets to increase the representation of women in decision-making roles at different levels. For instance, the targets aim for over 30% representation of women in the National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies, over 30% at the central level, over 20% at the provincial level, over 20% at the district level, and over 10% at the village level.
42. However, discriminatory gender norms and unequal power dynamics persist, affecting women's access to economic opportunities and decision-making⁴¹ resulting in women continuing to be underrepresented in senior government positions, accounting for only 10% of such positions in 2018.⁴² At sub-national levels and in managerial positions women's representation is much lower: only 144 women occupied the position of district or city governors, representing only 1,39% of all district or city governors⁴³ and under 3% of village chiefs are women.⁴⁴
43. The sub-national targets set by the Lao government, as outlined in the 9th NSDEP or the NAP on gender equality, are particularly low. For example, the goal of achieving only 10% of women's representation at the village level is far from being sufficient. The Lao government should take more significant steps to increase women's representation. This representation is crucial for shaping policies that are sensitive to gender-related issues and can effectively address the specific needs and challenges faced by women and girls, including issues such as gender-based violence and reproductive rights.

44. Questions

- Can the State party provide an overview of any ongoing or proposed initiatives aimed at providing training and capacity-building programs for aspiring women politicians, in order to enable more effective political engagement for women?



- In line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR, how does the government intend to promote women's full and equal participation in politics in order to emphasize the importance of women's representation for inclusive governance?

Article 9: Nationality

45. To implement nationwide birth registration, among other measures, the Lao government adopted the 2016-2025 Strategy for Citizen Registration and Statistics, amended the Family Law (No. 44/NA/2018), and issued registration procedure guidelines. In addition, Lao PDR also developed communication strategies through various means to raise awareness.
46. Despite the Lao government's efforts, the coverage of birth registration has declined from 45.5% in 2019 to 28.7% in 2021, with a notable 11.9 percentage point decline between 2020 and 2021. This decline underscores the registration challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵ One-third of children under five do not have a birth registration and only 60 per cent of children are registered in their first year of life, and mothers/caregivers do not see birth registration as a priority.⁴⁶
47. Low birth registration rates have significant consequences, hindering access to education, training, employment, and essential services, and leaving children vulnerable to child labor and early marriages. This lack of registration can make it easier to conceal a girl's real age in cases of child marriage. The reasons for low registration rates include resource constraints and limited staff capacity at the District Office of Home Affairs, despite birth registration being officially free. Households also bear associated costs such as transportation expenses, lost income on travel days, and occasional certificate printing fees. Furthermore, since a birth certificate is not a prerequisite for accessing essential social services like healthcare and education, many parents fail to recognize its significance in safeguarding children's rights.

48. Questions

- What specific measures and policies has the government implemented to raise awareness campaigns to educate communities about the importance of birth registration, emphasizing how it protects children's rights and enhances their access to essential services?
- How has the government worked to deploy mobile registration units to reach remote and marginalized communities, ensuring that all children, regardless of location, have the opportunity to be registered?



Article 10: Equality in education

49. The Lao government's commitment to ensuring continuous learning opportunities for all Lao students, irrespective of gender, is reflected in the adoption of the 2020 Decree on lifelong learning. This measure aims to provide manpower, budgetary support, and infrastructure for ongoing education while offering incentives to teachers and education workers, thereby ensuring access to education for all Lao citizens.⁴⁷
50. Nevertheless, deeply rooted gender roles and traditional norms still prevent young girls from accessing equal learning opportunities in Lao PDR, with families often prioritizing boys' education over girls', sometimes leading to early marriages for girls. Statistics indicate that 35% of adult women have attained at least a secondary level of education, compared to 46% of men.⁴⁸ This gender gap extends to literacy rates (age between 15-24 years), with girls at 76.5% compared to 84.6 % for boys, and lower educational achievements.⁴⁹
51. Gender-based segregation persists in higher education in Lao PDR, which further perpetuates conventional gender stereotypes. Enrollment rates among women and girls in vocational schools and higher education, particularly in non-traditional fields such as science, technology, and engineering, are disproportionately low.⁵⁰ While the number of female students in public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges is on the rise, with women constituting 43 % of all enrolled students in the 2016-2017 academic year, their choice of courses continues to align with occupations traditionally categorized as "female," such as tailoring, basic business administration, and hospitality.⁵¹
52. Livelihood disruptions and income fluctuations resulting from crises such as COVID-19 increase the likelihood of students dropping out and hinder their chances of completing their education, which could result in long-term setbacks for development.
53. The combination of the COVID-19 crisis and a continuous decline in government investment in education in Lao PDR has led to insufficient education infrastructure and conditions, resulting in a severe shortage of resources. As a result, several schools are being forced to merge or shut down. In 2023, Savannakhet Province is expected to witness the closure of 25 schools primarily due to a critical shortage of teachers. This situation significantly hampers access to education, particularly for Lao youth, with a disproportionate impact on girls.⁵²
54. As an example, in the 2020/2021 academic year, the upper secondary education dropout rate for girls was 9.5%, slightly surpassing that of boys, which stood at 9.2%. The escalation in dropout



rates among girls warrants attention due to the associated risks of early marriage and early pregnancy or even sexual exploitation.⁵³

55. Girls and women from ethnic backgrounds are one of the most disadvantaged groups when it comes to access to education, which is often not provided in their native language.
56. The Lao government must increase its efforts to address gender disparities in access to education in Lao PDR, which limit women's opportunities to secure equitable employment or hold significant roles within Lao society.

57. Questions

- In line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR, how does the government plan to implement measures to alleviate the indirect costs of education to facilitate increased access to education for girls?
- Can the State party provide updates on recent or contemplated efforts to develop and implement strategies to prevent early marriage and child labor among girls, as these factors often lead to dropouts?
- What strategies and programs has the government implemented to eliminate discriminatory stereotypes that impede access for girls to education and raise awareness among parents and community leaders of the importance of education for women?

Article 11: Employment

58. While there have been positive developments in terms of greater acceptance of women in education, business, and village leadership roles, as well as shifts in perceptions and attitudes regarding the role of women in the economy and society, challenges persist. Uneven economic opportunities, exacerbated by the significant burden of unpaid care and domestic work on women, who, on average, spend five times as many hours on these tasks as men, continue to hinder women's participation in economic development.⁵⁴
59. In terms of income disparity, women's average monthly income is only 77% of that of men, and women are overrepresented in low-skill occupations.⁵⁵ Thus, women are disproportionately represented in jobs with minimum wage earnings. The minimum monthly wage in Lao PDR was increased from LAK 1.2 to LAK 1.3 million in May 2023⁵⁶ but is still largely insufficient to cope with the skyrocketing inflation that Lao PDR has been witnessing since COVID-19, which is only adding hardship and making it difficult for Lao women to cope with the daily life expenses or necessities.



60. Further, the impacts of the economic crisis are felt harder by women who are more disproportionately impacted than men. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, sectors in Lao PDR such as tourism, agriculture, the garment industry, and the informal economy, which have a high prevalence of female labor, were severely affected, leading to a greater number of women losing their jobs. Furthermore, around 71% of small and medium-sized businesses had to suspend their operations during the pandemic, with 82% of these businesses being owned by women.⁵⁷

61. Questions

- Can the State party provide information on its current efforts or potential plans to enhance women's skills development and vocational training programs to equip women with marketable skills, enabling them to transition from unpaid family work to income-generating employment?
- Could the State party provide information on any ongoing or planned efforts to review and amend existing laws and regulations to eliminate gender-based discrimination in employment and promote gender equality in all sectors, including the informal economy?

Article 12: Healthcare and Family Planning

62. In accordance with the implementation of the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Children, Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) Strategy for 2016-2025, Lao PDR has made progress in providing family planning services, enhancing the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls, and reducing maternal mortality rates during the past decade, particularly before the onset of the pandemic.⁵⁸

63. Yet, marginalized women still face challenges in accessing safe and effective family planning methods, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

64. Based on a report from the World Bank released in October 2022,⁵⁹ approximately two-thirds of households in Lao PDR have decreased their expenditures on healthcare and education. Data from health facilities indicates a significant reduction in the utilization of essential health services (EHS) and nutrition, particularly among vulnerable populations.⁶⁰ Approximately 10% of the reduction in the uptake of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services, including Family Planning, has resulted in an increased number of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions among women and girls.



65. Diminished access to EHS has the potential to detrimentally affect human capital development in Lao PDR, adding to the obstacles encountered by young women from disadvantaged families in their efforts to break free from the poverty cycle.
66. In Lao PDR, insufficient and inadequately equipped medical facilities to handle complex cases, along with a substantial portion of births occurring outside health facilities, further compound these challenges. Only about 65 % of deliveries are attended by trained health attendants.⁶¹
67. Moreover, ethnic women residing in remote areas encounter even more difficulties in accessing quality healthcare due to the considerable distance between their homes and hospitals equipped with appropriate facilities.⁶² Most ethnic women give birth at home, often without the assistance of trained professionals and access to care remains financially burdensome due to significant out-of-pocket expenses. In ethnic groups and rural areas, only 33.9 of births are attended by a health attendant.⁶³

68. Questions

- How does the government plan to strengthen maternal healthcare services, including antenatal and postnatal care, to reduce maternal mortality rates and improve maternal and newborn health outcomes, in line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR?
- Can the State party provide an overview of any ongoing or proposed initiatives aimed at ensuring that healthcare facilities providing sexual and reproductive health services are accessible to all women, especially those in rural and underserved areas?

Article 13: Economic and Social Benefits

69. The Lao government has promoted women's empowerment in the economic sector by facilitating women's access to funding through the Bank of Lao PDR, which also conducted training programs to enhance gender equality in the banking sector.⁶⁴ Additionally, with the 2013 Law on Social Security and the national strategy for social protection, the Lao government has taken steps to expand the coverage of social protection to provide benefits to pregnant women and pre-school-aged children to ensure their well-being.⁶⁵
70. However, social protection and social security remain elusive for several groups of women. This includes migrant women, women living in impoverished conditions, and those engaged in unpaid labor or working within the informal sectors.⁶⁶ For these women, accessing these vital safety nets



is a challenge as they confront exclusion from the protective measures that these systems offer, leaving them exposed to a range of economic and social risks.

71. Questions

- In line with the CEDAW's concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao PDR, what specific targeted measures and policies have Lao PDR implemented to increase access to financial services for women?
- What steps has the government taken to ensure that all women engaged in unpaid work or in the informal sector, both in rural and urban areas, have access to non-contributory social protection schemes?

Article 14: Rural women

72. Lao PDR is the most ethnically diverse nation in Southeast Asia, with over 49 official ethnic groups and 160 subgroups. However, the government does not officially recognize Indigenous Peoples and categorizes them as "ethnic groups".⁶⁷ In reality, the country can be grouped into four ethnolinguistic families, with Lao-Thai speakers comprising the majority. The remaining third belongs to various language families and are collectively called the Indigenous Peoples of Lao PDR.⁶⁸ Despite having voted in favor of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Lao government continues to consider the Lao society as a 'multi-ethnic' one,⁶⁹ which deprives Indigenous Peoples of specific rights and opportunities for self-determination.
73. If over the decades, the Lao government has made significant efforts to address the poverty gap between urban and rural areas where indigenous peoples primarily live, rural areas still witness a poverty rate three times higher than urban areas.
74. Indigenous women are significantly vulnerable to violation of their human rights due to their double marginalization, being women and indigenous. The non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups are more likely to be living in remote rural areas, exposed to disasters, and engaged in low productivity and vulnerable self-employment, mostly in agriculture.⁷⁰ Indeed, some ethnic groups do not always speak the Lao language, which limits their capacity to engage with the Lao-speaking public administration and hinders their access to services. Non-Lao-Tai children are more at risk of not having their births registered and while girls are more likely to be married early with much higher adolescent birth rates.⁷¹



75. Furthermore, discrimination against some indigenous groups persists, with indigenous women being disproportionately impacted. Due to their historical involvement in the "CIA's Secret War," the Hmong people face ongoing government discrimination and violence, categorized as being "anti-government".⁷² This results in severe abuses, including bombings, killings, and torture perpetrated against them. Among the Hmong communities, the ChaoFa Hmong subgroup fled government violence in the 1980s and now hides in remote areas like the Phou Bia jungle in Xieng Khouang. Their makeshift shelters are frequently destroyed by the Lao military, impacting their access to food and housing.⁷³
76. The hardship experienced by indigenous women is also exacerbated in the context of negative impacts of development or business projects, with indigenous women being dispossessed of their lands and resources.
77. Land concessions policy has long led to a disproportionate impact in terms of displacement on the uplands largely inhabited by non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups. In a specific case, the land where Hmong ethnic minority groups used to live was allocated for private commercial purposes which has exacerbated land alienation and reduced access by the rural populations to the natural and forest resources they have been customarily using for their livelihoods.⁷⁴ This has enhanced food insecurity in uplands and among ethnic groups as well as aggravated the challenges faced by Hmong women.
78. In another example, indigenous communities near the Attapeu dam in Southern Lao PDR were forcibly relocated without consultation or fair compensation for their ancestral lands.⁷⁵ They endured threats and harassment from Lao authorities to accept the terms. Lao blogger J.A highlighted their struggles on social media.⁷⁶ In a video, an indigenous woman expressed dissatisfaction with a \$ 1,000 offer for 10 hectares of land, and another recounted being coerced into accepting an unfair deal for her land.

79. Questions

- What steps has the government taken to implement various measures, including temporary special measures, to improve indigenous and rural women's access to education, healthcare and income-generating opportunities?
- What specific legal and policy measures have the government implemented to strengthen initiatives aimed at overcoming barriers to indigenous women's political participation at all levels?



Article 15: Equality before the law

80. The Lao Constitution in articles 35 and 37 states that men and women have equal rights and duties before the law.⁷⁷ But despite the enactment of a Legal Aid decree in 2018 to expend legal aid the country, the legal aid system in Lao PDR faces ongoing systemic challenges.⁷⁸ These challenges include a chronic shortage of legal professionals, both lawyers and judges, as well as a limited understanding of access to justice issues among marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities.⁷⁹
81. Moreover, a significant portion of the population in Lao PDR still relies on customary law and village-based justice systems due to the limited reach of the formal justice system outside of urban areas.⁸⁰ This reliance on informal mechanisms can be attributed to various factors, including language barriers and limited proficiency in Lao and literacy skills, particularly among rural women. Additionally, the scarcity of legal professionals, with fewer than 200 lawyers nationwide, contributes to this reliance on customary and village-based justice systems.⁸¹
82. The continued use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, particularly in rural areas through village mediation units, does not consistently result in gender-sensitive outcomes. These alternative mechanisms often perpetuate societal stereotypes, further stigmatize women, and prioritize family interests over women's rights.⁸²
83. In addition, effective complaint mechanisms continue to be lacking for certain types of abuses targeting women. For instance, up to 44% of victims of gender-based violence do not seek assistance or demand accountability as prevailing gender norms, negative stereotypes, as well as feelings of shame and stigma, often deter women from reporting these incidents.⁸³

84. Questions

- Can the Lao government outline recent or future efforts to allocate sufficient human, technical, and financial resources to improve legal literacy among women and provide mandatory capacity-building on gender issues for the judiciary?
- How does the Lao government ensure that women who have experienced gender-based discrimination and violence can file complaints without fear of reprisal or social stigma and have access to effective remedies and support services?



Article 16: Marriage and Family Life

85. Lao PDR prohibits polygamy in Article 142 of the Lao Civil Code⁸⁴ and also prohibits marriage for Lao citizens under 18 years old in Article 269 of its Penal Code.⁸⁵
86. Yet, early marriage continues to be commonplace in Lao PDR, with women tending to marry at the age of 19.2 years, a statistic that has exhibited little deviation over the course of the past twenty years.⁸⁶
87. The proportion of young women getting married is closely linked to their education level and wealth, with fewer urban youth marrying compared to their rural counterparts. Early marriage is also more prevalent among some ethnic groups and marginalized communities, as deep-seated norms regarding gender roles lead to families often prioritizing boys' education over girls', sometimes leading to early marriages for girls.⁸⁷
88. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as families grappled with increasing financial strain, thousands of young Lao girls found themselves forced to abandon their education and enter early marriages. This distressing trend emerged as a means for families to alleviate their overwhelming financial burdens, as a girl's early marriage means one less mouth to feed for the parents. Notably, reports highlighted that this issue particularly increased among certain ethnic groups within Lao PDR, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and support to address child marriage in rural areas.⁸⁸ Efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable communities, especially in regions with a high prevalence of child marriages, are essential to safeguard the well-being and future prospects of young Lao girls.

89. Questions

- What steps has the government taken or is contemplating to ensure the strict application of the Lao Civil Code, Penal Code, and Family Law, which prohibits early marriage and polygamy?
- Could the government provide information on specific measures or strategies that will be implemented to address the root causes of early marriage and polygamy?



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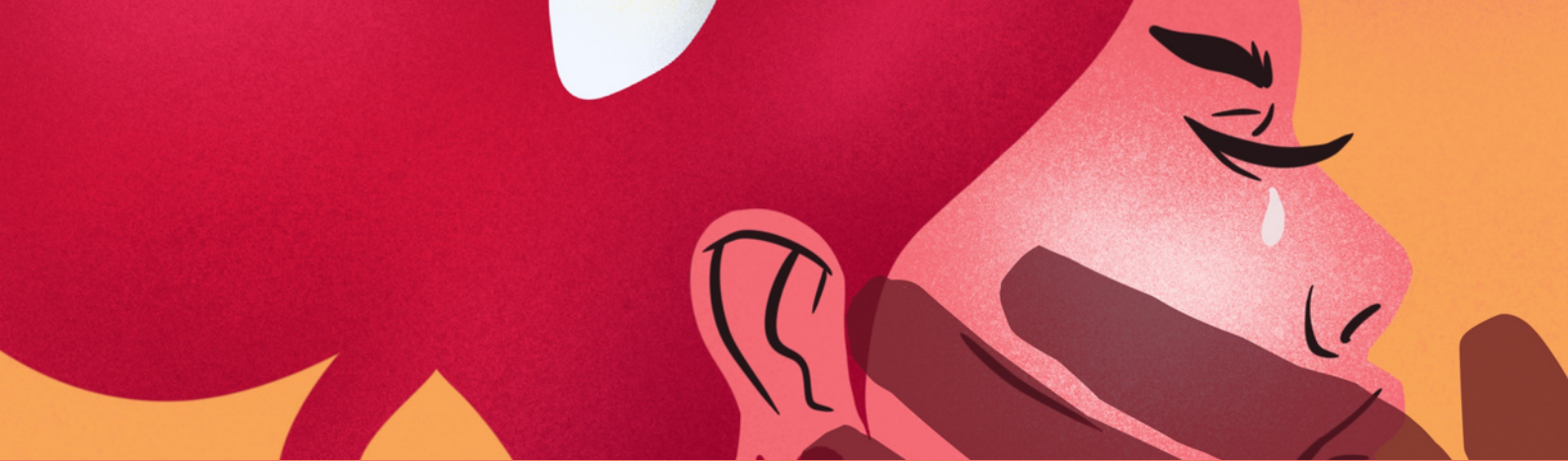
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In the Shadows of Power: Women Confronting Patriarchy in Laos



Joint Civil Society CEDAW Report to inform the List of Issues to be considered by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), during the Pre-Sessional Working Group for its 88th Session



#CEDAWLAOS



About Manushya Foundation

Manushya Foundation was founded in 2017 with the vision to build a movement of Equal Human Beings #WeAreManushyan. Manushya is an intersectional feminist human rights organization reinforcing the power of humans, in particular women, human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, forest-dependent communities, environmental defenders, LGBTI groups, and Youth, to be at the heart of decision-making processes that concern them and to speak truth to power at the forefront of their fight for Human Rights, Equality, Social Justice and Peace. Through coalition building, capacity building, community-led research, advocacy and campaigning, and sub-granting, local communities become Agents of Change fighting for their rights and providing solutions to improve their lives and livelihoods, pushing back on authoritarian governments and harmful corporations. Manushya defends local communities and seeks justice with them before the United Nations, focusing on women's rights and gender equality, digital rights, climate & environmental justice, and corporate accountability across Asia.



MANUSHYA

#WeAreManushyan ∞ Equal Human Beings

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