

# LAOS COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT

In this Spotlight, the main focus is on girls from ethnic minorities.

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## Introduction

Laos, a landlocked country of 6.5 million people in Southeast Asia, has seen impressive economic growth in recent years. Laos reports an annual GDP growth rate of 7.5%<sup>1</sup> – the highest in the region – and between 1992 and 2008 the population living on less than \$1.25/day dropped from 46% to 34%.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, economic growth, fuelled largely by natural resource extraction, far outpaces social development. Laos remains a *least developed country*, ranked 139 out of 187 countries in the 2014 Human Development Report.<sup>3</sup> While the Government of Laos prioritizes human development as critical to their graduation to a more developed country (MDC) status, deep social inequities persist. Ethnicity, wealth quintile, geography and education levels emerge as key determinants of social exclusion.<sup>4</sup> These determinants intersect in alarming ways for children, particularly girls, of the more than 49 ethnic minority groups whose languages, livelihood systems, religious beliefs and social organization differ from the majority Lao-Tai group.

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Bridging this equity gap is critical to child rights, as well as Laos's graduation to MDC status. Educating and protecting ethnic adolescent girls is critical to social transformation in Laos – the generational dividend. Children of an uneducated mother will have a 57.9% chance of being stunted compared to a 15% chance with a mother who has higher education.<sup>6</sup> The child of an uneducated mother will have a 116/1000 probability of dying under the age of 5, as opposed to 41/1000 probability for a child whose mother has higher education. The pattern is consistent with child vaccinations and importantly a child's probability of attending a secondary education (*ibid.*). As Laos has one of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates among the countries in the region (with 94 in 1000 adolescents girls, aged 15 -19 becoming pregnant,<sup>7</sup>) there is a huge opportunity for change. As both children and mothers, ethnic minority adolescent girls could play a pivotal role in the equity solution. By educating girls, protecting them from early marriage and exploitation, increasing their access to safe economic opportunities, improving health services and preparing them for motherhood, we can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and social exclusion for ethnic minority populations.

## The Equity Gap: Education

### *Enrolment*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>

<sup>2</sup> UNDP. Laos country info 2015. <http://www.la.undp.org/content/laopdr/en/home/countryinfo/>.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP. 2014 Human Development Report. <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr14-report-en-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF 2012

<sup>5</sup> GoL and UNDP 2013

<sup>6</sup> GoL, UNFPA, UNICEF. 2012

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[http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/laos/2015/03/23/11739/laopdr\\_adolescent\\_and\\_youth\\_situation\\_analysis\\_report/](http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/laos/2015/03/23/11739/laopdr_adolescent_and_youth_situation_analysis_report/)

Education indicators reveal a significant gap between the deprivations experienced by majority Lao-Tai children, who speak the majority language and generally live in urban areas or along the fertile plains of the Mekong River, and ethnic minority children who speak local languages and live in remote, rural and sparsely populated mountain communities. Within those remote communities, structural and social barriers limit the effective delivery of health, education and child protection services. 40% of the rural villages in Lao PDR do not have road access and only 80% of villages have primary schools. Of these 42.8% are 'incomplete,' offering only the first few grades.<sup>8</sup> Primary school net enrollment rates for the majority Lao-Tai is significantly higher than for ethnic minorities of the Mon- Khmer and Sino-Tibetan linguistic groups at 90%, 69% and 49% respectively.<sup>9</sup>

### *Learning*

Ethnic minority children are also left behind in learning. Literacy is significantly lower for ethnic groups over the majority Lao-Tai. For instance, in the capital city of Vientiane, 44% of children in grade 3 achieve independent functioning in Lao language, compared to only 4% of children in Oudomxai, a largely non-Lao province.<sup>10</sup> In rural and predominately ethnic communities, literacy rates amongst 15-24 year olds stand at 48%, which is significantly lower than the lowland more urban plains of the Mekong, where literacy rates stand at an impressive 91%.<sup>11</sup> A similar pattern of deprivation in literacy is seen between the poorest wealth quintile (39%) and the richest (96%).<sup>12</sup> Indeed a Save the Children in Laos baseline study of literacy in grade 3 (2015) found that the average reading comprehension was 68% for Lao speakers and only 26% for non-Lao speakers. Gender discrepancies also emerge between ethnic minority girls and boys. Literacy between Hmong-le Mein boys and girls has a difference of 33%, with boys demonstrating surprisingly high literacy rates (80%) for a population whose mother-tongue is dramatically different from the language of instruction. Lack of basic literacy in early grades impedes children's progress through school and limits their life aspirations.

### *Barriers to Access, from Primary through Secondary*

Access to the complete cycle of basic education – and transition to secondary – presents challenges to many Lao families. Despite a young population where 60% are estimated to be under 25 years old (23% between 10-19), there are only 1,586 public and private secondary schools in Laos.<sup>13</sup> Just under half of children (44.6%) of secondary school age (11-17 years) are attending secondary school; 25% are still attending primary school while 30% are not attending school at all.<sup>14</sup> Between 2012 and 2013, there are marked disparities between the wealthiest and the poorest parts of the population (despite progressive improvements since 1998), with only 78% of the poorest attending primary education, compared with 95% of the richest quintile of population. The gap persists for secondary education: 88% attendance rate for the richest and 52% for the poorest.

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<sup>8</sup> UNICEF. 2011

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF 2011

<sup>10</sup> MOES. "The evidence base for ESDP 2016-20 formulation and prioritisation: a summary of critical sector issues identified through recent research and data analysis." Prepared by Michael Morrissey.

<sup>11</sup> GoL and UNDP 2013, UNESCO 2005

<sup>12</sup> GoL and UNDP 2013

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO 2015

<sup>14</sup> UNFPA and LYU 2014

<sup>15</sup> There is also a significant gap between primary and secondary attendance of Lai-Tai children and children from other ethnic backgrounds – Lao-Tai girls attend primary school 18% more than Hmong- Le Mien girls and for boys there is a 15% gap as well. Interestingly, non-Lai-Tai children girls attend school even less than boys: in 2011-2012, 86% of Hmong- Le Mien boys attended primary school compared with 80% of girls. For Chinese Tibetan children, the gap between boys and girls persists (76% for boys and 70% for girls), with the lowest gap being registered among Mon-Khmer children.<sup>16</sup>

On average a child in Laos only has 8.2 years of schooling, with boys on average staying longer in school (8.8 years for boys, 7.6 years for girls).<sup>17</sup> These challenges are compounded for ethnic minorities and girls. Consultations with children in Laos (SCI 2015, unpublished) found that the chore burden and parental expectations for income generation restricted ethnic minority children's opportunities to attend school. The majority of ethnic rural families are involved in subsistence farming and therefore their survival is often contingent on the family unit supporting activities at home. These findings have been reinforced by a UNFPA's study on youth in Laos, which found the highest reason for not attending school in Laos is low parental income (23%).<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, again this is more detrimental to ethnic girls than boys.

### *Gender Norms and Girls' Education*

Social and cultural norms of ethnic groups and especially Hmong- Le Mein dictate strong traditional gender roles which magnify the opportunity costs of education. Men are the head of the household and families are often comprised of 9-14 people. Girls and women take on household responsibilities, as well as doing equal amounts in income generation as boys and men, meaning they have less time to set aside for education opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Early marriage is common in ethnic communities.<sup>20</sup> The culture of girls marrying early is advantageous for the recipient family as they gain labour, as well as being an advantage for the girl's family due to the dowry paid, especially in the Hmong-Le Mein culture. Nonetheless, social norms dictate that married girls are not allowed to participate in education.<sup>21</sup> Furthering this, a girl's education is not prioritized by families because boys traditionally inherit the family property and girls leave the home to marry.<sup>22</sup> Scarce household resources thus tend to be invested in boys' education.

### *Protection and Health Risks*

Education, protection and health are intimately connected. Child marriage is more common within individuals with lower educational attainment. In Laos, between 2011 and 2012, 17.5% of girls who had not completed any education level married under the age of 15, in comparison to only 0.7% of their higher educated peers; 17.2% of those who married under 15 were Hmong Le-Mein .<sup>23</sup> Child marriage generally involves force or coercion and, in addition to violating a child's right, exposes that child to safety risks and social isolation. Child marriage sets off a chain reaction –

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<sup>15</sup> Warr et al 2015

<sup>16</sup> LSIS 2011-12

<sup>17</sup> UNFPA and LYU 2014

<sup>18</sup> UNFPA and LYU. 2014

<sup>19</sup> UNFPA and LYU. 2014, CDC 2008

<sup>20</sup> GoL, UNFPA, UNICEF. 2012

<sup>21</sup> Lyndal Pearce. 2011

<sup>22</sup> SCI unpublished 2015

<sup>23</sup> GoL, UNFPA, UNICEF. 2012

multiple pregnancies stresses the household, generates additional risks around pregnancy<sup>24</sup> and weakens the family's capacity to invest in their children.

Young people without adequate knowledge and skills are vulnerable to risky migration, vulnerable employment and exploitation in modernizing Laos.<sup>25</sup> Qualitative studies in Laos have found young women, and especially ethnic girls with limited opportunities for quality education, have migrated for income opportunities. These ethnic girls have then faced multiple challenges related to managing money, work-place abuse, exploitation in the entertainment and sex industries, and barriers to healthy eating and nutrition.<sup>26</sup>

### **Policy recommendations**

All Lao children deserve to learn from quality, relevant education. Bridging the equity gap in Laos will require a targeted investment in the education, health and protection of ethnic minority adolescent girls. Action needs to be taken at critical moments in girls' lives: prior to puberty, throughout puberty and as girls become young mothers. Insights gleaned from consultation and research for and with girls needs to inform program and policy. Narrow programming approaches that do not consider the interlinked aspects of a girls' life – connections between her health, protection, education and livelihood, as well as the relationships that either support or limit her – will fail.

#### **1. More ethnic minority adolescents transitioning to good quality, safe and accessible lower secondary schools**

The current demand for lower secondary school far exceeds the supply. Given the distance from villages to school, many lower secondary students live as informal boarders in precarious situations on the campuses of those schools. They are unaccompanied minors, often living in provisional bamboo shacks that their parents build. Investment in appropriate and safe dormitories, water, sanitation and hygiene facilities is critical – but it is a stop-gap solution. More schools need to be built closer to rural source communities to ensure that families feel safe enough to let girls attend. In addition, school curricula should prepare all adolescents for their transition into adulthood, with key reproductive health information, financial literacy and the life skills they need to navigate the risks and opportunities in their environment, as well as the challenges inherent in living far away from home.<sup>27 28</sup>

#### **2. More social safety nets, learning and economic opportunities for out-of-school girls and young mothers**

Safe spaces, mentors and opportunities for learning and friendship can combat social isolation and ensure that a trusted adult can intervene and protect girls if necessary. Girls can also support each other as they learn about safety, health, finances and new skills. In

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<sup>24</sup> UNFPA, LYU. 2014

<sup>25</sup> GoL and UNDP. 2013

<sup>26</sup> UNFPA, LYU. 2014

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/resources/resources/education-system-profiles/lao-pdr/sector-wide-challenges/>

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.moe.gov.la/data/publications/IE\\_Strategy\\_Final\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.moe.gov.la/data/publications/IE_Strategy_Final_Eng.pdf)

recent consultations, girls identified their desire for a trusted advisor who can support them. They also expressed their desire to learn from an adult about different and safe ways to make and manage money. This was particularly important for young mothers who suddenly faced the need to provide for an expanding household. Young mothers also wanted information about children, parenting, health and their bodies.

### 3. More girls consulted and making decisions about their own lives

Young people rarely have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that are taken regarding their lives. Voices of young people are not yet incorporated into Lao local or national development planning.<sup>29</sup> Lao government structures, such as the Lao Youth Union and the Lao Women's Union, offer good opportunities for child participation, but those opportunities should be diversified through clubs, school governance mechanisms and non-governmental organizations that support activities related to arts, culture, literacy or media. Exciting work is underway in urban centers, but this has not yet penetrated to rural areas.

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<sup>29</sup> UNFPA, LYU. 2014

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