



## FACT SHEET LAO PDR

# Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production



### KEY FACTS

- Lao PDR's population is 51% female and 49% male
- 69.5% of the female labour force and 55.6% of the male labour force, work in agriculture
- women hold dual responsibility for farm and household management
- women have on average a 30% lower literacy rate than men
- in rice farming women have a substantial role, which is enlarging
- women are actively involved in aquaculture and manage small livestock production
- marketing of agricultural products is mainly done by women
- women contribute actively to household income through weaving, petty trade, wage labour and bamboo work
- women's contribution as family labour is undervalued and was never included in national accounting as work

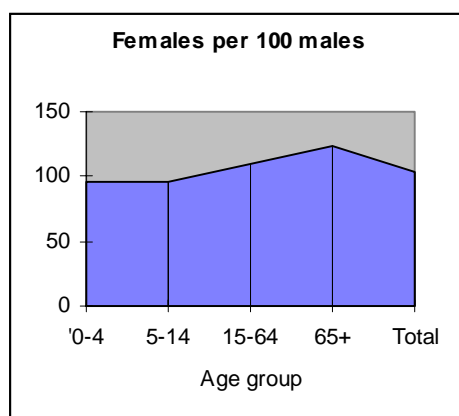
## GENERAL PROFILE

### Population

Lao People's Democratic Republic, in short Lao PDR, has a population of approximately 4.9 million people, small relative to its land area. An average 45 percent are under 15 years of age; only 4.5 percent are older than 65. At present, the population growth rate is 2.9% and the fertility rate 6.7%.

The diversity of the population is represented by 68 ethnic groups divided into three major categories: 1) Lao Loum - occupying the lowland plains and Mekong river valley, comprise 65% of the population; 2) Lao Theung - occupying the mountain slopes comprise 22%; and 3) Lao Soung - settling on the mountain tops over 1,000 metres claim about 13% of the population.

Data show that 51% of the population are female and 49% male. Especially the older age group is represented by more women than men, attributable to war casualties.



Source: NSC, 1993

In rural areas women outnumber men. In urban areas there are more men who have migrated for work.

The population distribution by age group, sex and marital status shows high proportions of female divorcees and widows. This is particularly true in the age group of 40-70 years of age. In rural areas, women and children have to work hard to replace male labour and many women hold dual responsibility for farm as well as household management (Lao PDR 1995).

### Education

Adult literacy of women and men (15 - 40 years) is estimated at 50%. Among the literate, 65% are men and 35% are women. In rural areas literacy rates among women older than 36 is reported to be as low as around 20%.

Average years of schooling are 2.9 overall, 3.6 for males and 2.1 for females. This reflects the preference for schooling of boys and the custom that the girl child assists the mother in the household.

### Labour

The economically active population consists of 48% men and 52% women. Agriculture occupies close to 93% of all women employed. The closest two other sectors of importance for women are trade and education.

The low education level of women is reflected in two ways: the average wage rate for women being 28% lower than wages earned by men; and the almost

53% of female workers in the informal sector, double the number of men.

**Human Development Index (HDI)** rank of Lao PDR in 1996 was 138 out of 174 nations, indicating a low life expectancy at birth, low educational attainment and low income. The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) rank for Lao PDR is 106 of 130 countries. The difference between the HDI and GDI is +1. This means that Lao PDR has succeeded in building basic human capacities of both women and men, without substantial gender disparities

## AGRICULTURE

Most Lao PDR households depend on agriculture and its related subsectors of livestock rearing, fisheries and forest exploitation for their living. Agricultural production in Lao PDR is largely subsistence-oriented and farm technology is characterized by low inputs, low risks and low outputs. Crops account for about 55% of agricultural GDP, with rice contributing about 40%, livestock 39%, fisheries 1% and forestry 5% (World Bank, 1995).

According to the 1985 population census, 54% of the people employed in the agricultural sector are women. Women took over traditional roles of men in the farming system, such as ploughing, during the war period and this has in some areas continued to the present time. In addition women are responsible for marketing the agricultural produce in local markets.

In comparison to women in other Asian countries, Lao women enjoy good opportunities for access to and control over **land resources**, both legally and customarily. Well over

50 percent of the women, especially in the Lao Loum ethnic group, live in areas which have strong matrifocal and matrilineal traditions, including female land inheritance. Any property acquired during marriage is regarded as joint property of husband and wife.

### Crop production

The predominant crop is glutinous, or sticky, rice, which is grown on over 80% of the cultivated land; about one third is produced in uplands through slash-and-burn cultivation.

Traditionally, men plough, make bunds and prepare seedbeds, and women do more than half of the transplanting of rice, weeding, harvesting, threshing and post-harvest operations. In some areas the traditional task division has changed due to lack of male labour. Women are increasingly involved in land preparation, irrigation and preparing bunds and seedbeds.



Apart from rice, rural households produce vegetables, sweet potato, tobacco, cassava and maize, and they tend fruit and banana trees. In general for these crops, men do the land preparation, ploughing and fencing. Women do the weeding, inter-cultural operations and marketing. But, men and women jointly plant, put manure, irrigate and harvest.

<b>Gender Division of Labour in Rice Farming (Lao Loum Ethnic Group):</b>			
Tasks	MA	FA	Both
Selection of seed		X	
Soaking			X
Making bunds	X		
Making fence			X
Transporting manure			X
Ploughing	X		
Harrowing	X		
Sowing			X
Uprooting seedlings	X	XX	
Transplanting	X	XX	
Irrigating	X		
Guarding the field at night	X		
Weeding	X	XX	
Harvesting			X
Threshing	X		
Packing hay		X	
Threshing by hand	XX	X	
Transporting to storage			X
Marketing rice		X	
MA = Male Adult FA = Female Adult Both = Men and women			

Source: Schenk, 1995

### Forestry

In 1990 Lao PDR had 11.2 million ha. of forests, or 47% of total land coverage. It is estimated that 300,000 ha of land are annually under slash-and-burn cultivation. Forests form an economic resource base for rural communities, providing for household food security. Women collect mushrooms, wild berries, fruits, nuts, honey and earthworms, and also medicinal herbs. Men hunt wild animals. In periods of drought or floods, which tend to occur about once every five years, hunting and gathering forest products become important mechanisms to cope with food shortages.

Firewood is the most common fuel. Firewood collection is mostly done by women, while men cut trees for firewood.

### Fisheries

Since Lao PDR is a landlocked country, the main fisheries resources are

the Mekong river and its tributaries, reservoirs, rice fields and ponds. Fish pond culture and rice-cum-fish cultivation both have increased in importance over the past decades.

Both women and men are involved in fishing activities, women especially in management of fish ponds and fish culture in the rice fields. Women play a key role in processing and marketing fish.



### Livestock

In the farming system of Lao PDR, livestock is an important component. Many households depend on livestock for their main source of cash income. A majority of the farmers use buffaloes and bullocks for ploughing. Manure is used to fertilise the rice and upland fields.

The gender division of labour in livestock management is such that women and men jointly care for cows and buffaloes. In the rainy season these animals often graze in the forests, and in the dry season in the fallow rice fields. Women pound most of the animal feed and feed the pigs and poultry. Sometimes men also feed the pigs. Women sell small livestock like pigs, chickens, ducks and eggs in the market. In those households that have goats, girl children often have the responsibility for grazing and watching the goats. Animal diseases, especially in poultry, are a serious production constraint for the farmers (Schenk, 95).

### ENVIRONMENT

A number of environmental trends have significant impact on rural livelihood in general and on women's lives in particular. Women are usually disproportionately affected because they are more dependent on natural resources in order to carry out their farm and household activities. Deforestation and soil erosion caused by illegal logging and shifting cultivation threaten not only natural resources and biodiversity in Lao PDR, but also the chance for many rural communities to have sustainable and secure livelihoods. The lowland rice production causes declining land productivity due to monocropping and inadequate use of fertilizers.

The use of pesticides and fertilizer is still very limited, but increasing rapidly. There are some indications that fish stocks in the Mekong river have declined by 20% due to uncontrolled fishing.

### RURAL PRODUCTION

Off-farm activities are undertaken by both women and men. Women earn a regular income through manufacturing, such as weaving and tailoring, retail and petty trade. Men derive income through manufacturing, such as rice milling, retail and transport activities, as well as services and migrant labour (Minot, 1995).

The **Lao Women's Union (LWU)** is a mass organisation representing nearly a quarter of the female population. The union is represented at village, district, provincial and central level. LWU has initiated and implemented activities, such as weaving, handicraft, managing rice-banks and revolving funds in many villages.

### FOOD SECURITY

Lao PDR agricultural productivity is low in comparison with neighbouring Asian countries. Agriculture covers virtually all the national food requirements, with annual rice imports ranging from 27,000 to 64,000 tons. Both localized drought and flooding are frequent causes of crop failure and food shortages.

Important contributors to food security of the households are the forestry, livestock and fisheries sectors. The profile of gender roles in Lao PDR farming systems bears evidence that women are key contributors to household food security.

### POLICY AND PLANNING FOCUS

For agricultural development, Lao PDR puts emphasis on food security, environmental protection and human resource development. The ultimate aim is to achieve an agricultural growth target of 5 percent per annum.

In order to achieve this target, policymakers and planners need to:

- ✓ Collect gender-disaggregated local data and conduct gender sensitive agricultural censuses;
- ✓ Formulate gender-sensitive policies and plans based on a gender-disaggregated needs assessment;
- ✓ Formulate policies and plans to improve women's access to resources;
- ✓ Establish gender-disaggregated land titling procedures and land policies.

## PROGRAMME FOCUS

Agricultural and rural programmes in Lao PDR need to include in their activities the following areas of intervention, in order to achieve effective progress that addresses both women and men's priorities:

- ✓ Train field staff in gender sensitive and participatory planning and programme implementation;
- ✓ Acknowledge women as farmers and landowners, instead as mere wives of male farmers;
- ✓ Improve the extension system to become effective and equitable, in order to reach both women and men;
- ✓ Identify and respond to agricultural and household technology needs of women, in close collaboration among agricultural researchers, implementing agencies, grassroots workers and the Lao Women's Union;
- ✓ Support women in their manufacturing and marketing activities, by providing local marketing information, improving transportation and storage facilities, improving processing and packaging techniques and provision of credit;
- ✓ Conduct adult education to increase literacy among women in order to allow them to understand and adopt new technologies;
- ✓ Encourage school attendance of girls;
- ✓ Pay attention to health issues in the agricultural system, control of water-borne diseases and safe pesticide handling methods.

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