



IMPACT OF COVID-19 REIMAGINING GENDER

SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS



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BACKGROUND

The gendered impacts of infectious disease outbreaks have been well-documented in the most recent epidemics, such as Zika, SARS and Ebola. Ebola demonstrated the powerful effects of the combination of a health and economic shock, and the effects of public health measures on women. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both the higher incidence and intensity with which women experience poverty and vulnerability compared to men.

Impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods, poverty, health, food security and nutrition are being felt globally, but for women, women-led households and young adolescent girls and children, the gravity of impact is far higher. The heightened risk is either an outcome of structural differences between the livelihood sources of men and women or the impact of gender bias on access to basic goods and services. The gendered differences in access to human capital accumulation opportunities (i.e., health and education), agency and economic opportunities are fuelled by unequal social norms and power structures. Gender norms and practices collectively predisposition women for worse outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the depth and extent of these gender inequalities that persist in many societies across the globe.

Globally, experiences with recent epidemics show that:

- men are generally overrepresented in the incidence of risk conditions, which provides a platform for a gendered impact on policy responses that may focus explicitly on men and boys;
- health care services pertaining to women and adolescent girls, such as maternal and child health (MCH) or sexual reproductive health (SRH) services, are more likely to experience funding challenges, as they are sometimes considered non-essential;
- social and gender norms affect educational investment decisions; intra-household allocation of resources for home schooling and/or at the community-level might be redirected to boys over girls;
- gendered stereotypes and roles are likely to require women and girls to bear a higher burden of unpaid domestic care work. The multiple care responsibilities, as school closures and confinement measures are adopted, can lead to reductions in working time and the permanent exit of women from the labour market;
- loss of employment and income have grave consequences for progress towards empowering and improving the agency of women. As women lose financial independence, they become more prone to exploitation and abuse;
- women are largely engaged in vulnerable forms of work and in informal work, which often leaves them out of formal social protection measures targeted to workers; and
- social protection responses systematically lack the consideration of gendered risk and vulnerabilities, which leave many at-risk women without the necessary support.

IMPACT

Socio-economic deprivations

- » **Female workers are more likely to lose their source of income due to COVID-19.** The economic implications of this crisis are skewed towards jobs and sectors where women are overwhelmingly represented. ILO estimations suggest that in Lao PDR, 64.3 per cent of female employment is in the agricultural sector, 26.9 per cent is in the services sector, and 8.8 per cent is in the industries sector. Of the total employed females, over 87.5 per cent are self-employed. The impact of the crisis on these sectors, combined with the after-effects of severe weather events on the agricultural sector in 2019, will have a substantial impact on women.
- » **Women's caregiving responsibilities are set to multiply their burden during the lockdowns.** Gender inequalities and roles have intensified¹ due to the lockdown, as women continue to fulfil their roles as mothers and caregivers. In Lao PDR, women spend over four times the number of hours on unpaid care work compared to men (2013 estimate). The lockdown has forced families to be confined to the home and kept children out of school. Women are far more likely to absorb the additional burden of caring for children.

Human capital accumulation

- » Investments and access to essential services such as education and health care that enhance human capital are critical to improve the socio-economic, agency and empowerment outcomes for women. Unfortunately, access to these services are also partly dependent on women's socioeconomic status and agency. As a result of both supply and demand-side constraints, women's access to these services has been low in Lao PDR, even pre-COVID. **COVID-19 poses the risk of reversing progress made towards improving access to education and healthcare in recent years through investments in both supply and demand strengthening.**
 - **As resources are reallocated to combat COVID-19, the health sector is at risk of under prioritizing the investments in women and adolescent health care services, which are often considered unessential.** The uptake of sexual and reproductive health care services is already suffering. Ministry of Health (MoH) data show a 15 per cent decline in the uptake of new contraception users between January and April this year, compared to 2018 and 2019.² The microsimulation model predicts a reduction of contraception prevalence from 59.92 per cent at the baseline to 55.77 per cent in a high-impact scenario. Consultations with development partners working with adolescents reveal that gender and social norms stigmatise adolescent girls requesting such services (e.g., contraception, pregnancy tests, abortion or related counselling). Lack of awareness among health care workers further reduces the likelihood of maintaining and improving access to these services.
 - **Uptake of education is poised to decline in the short to medium term.** Education attendance is dropping and is likely to reduce further for both boys and girls should the government impose another lockdown. The disruption to education is far greater for girls, who are likely to take up domestic care activities or be married (especially adolescent girls aged 14 years and older).

¹ Based on KII discussions

² MoH, 2015

Agency and empowerment

- » **The loss of income has implications that risk reversing progress for women's agency and empowerment.** Women are at grave risk of losing independent income due to livelihood shocks of COVID-19. Financial insecurity can have long term negative consequences for women's safety and wellbeing. Research shows that women who have some degree of financial independence or empowerment and can participate in financial decision-making have a decreased probability of experiencing intimate partner violence.
- » **The agency and empowerment of women before COVID-19 have strong effects on the intensity of impact of COVID-19.** Women who have the agency to influence decisions affecting their lives, such as the ability of adolescent girls to refuse marriage or insist on continuing education, will determine the short and long-term impacts of COVID-19.
- » Gender norms also determine the options and opportunities available to girls and women. For example, households or communities where the needs of girls and women are not a priority and tied to gender-specific roles are at a disadvantage in terms of intra-household resource allocations.

Gender-based violence

- » **Data from the Lao Women's Union demonstrate that instances of child sexual abuse, particularly affecting girls, have increased amidst COVID-19 due to the associated lockdown measures.** The number of reported rape cases has increased as have the counselling requests by girls under the age of 18 who have been sexually exploited, mainly by family members. Many women and children are confined at home with their abusers while services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible due to the lockdown.

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancies

- » **For many families, child marriage is a source of financial relief.** The livelihood shock brought by the pandemic is likely to exacerbate the deterioration of family and community structures, which could reinforce the desire to control girls' sexuality³ while reducing the pressure on limited household income by marrying girls young. Based on experiences of previous economic crises, rising poverty is set to increase adverse traditional practices such as child marriage and forced marriage, especially for girls.
- » **Linked with access to health care and education, UNFPA estimates an increase in the number of unintended pregnancies in 2020-2021 by 15.46 per cent (44,322) in the best-case scenario and potentially by up to 23.9 per cent (68,541) based on the extrapolation of administrative data.** Of the unintended pregnancies, 35 per cent are expected to occur among females aged 15–24 years.

³ Girls Not Brides, 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS

National government



- **Invest in the resilience of the female workforce through social protection and economic empowerment programmes:**
 - » Provide cash-based support to families with children, as caregivers may no longer be able to engage in economic activities if they are busy caring for children who are no longer in school. These interventions are critically important in single-parent households.
 - » Adopt gender-sensitive economic incentives and relief packages such as cash transfers for women, expand unemployment benefits to those employed in the informal sector, and/or provide tax relief for industries dominated by women-owned businesses.
- Mainstream gender equity in all national-level response programmes, focusing on gender sensitivity of all interventions. **Any cash-based support provided must consider the national landscape and prevent the exclusion of women and other marginalised groups by design and in implementation.**
 - » Members of many vulnerable groups, including migrant workers and ethnic minority groups, may not have national ID documents or proof of income or employment. Therefore, requiring these documents may automatically exclude the most vulnerable individuals.
 - » Women are at high-risk of losing employment and their income sources, and very likely to bear the burden of caregiving responsibilities as children stay home. Women are also less likely to have IDs or access to mobile phones or bank accounts. All delivery mechanisms must recognize and build around these bottlenecks to ensure that the support reaches women, who are often most at need.
- **Monitor and provide the necessary support systems to prevent gender-based violence:**
 - » Ensure that domestic violence shelters are declared essential services and increase the mobilization of financial resources to these centres as well as to civil society and advocacy groups that lead this line of response.
 - » Strengthen rule of law to prevent gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation.
 - » Ensure that programmes, including education initiatives, support and encourage the participation of girls.
 - » Strengthen the capacity of existing hotlines at the Lao Women's Union and build strong linkages with systems at the provincial level to enable women to access support easily, even during lockdown periods.

- **Ensure the continuation of SRH and MCH services:**
 - » Strengthen and scale up youth friendly SRH information through service providers, peer networks, telephone helplines.
 - » Prioritize SRH products and ensure continued delivery of youth friendly SRH, maternal health and family planning services through health facilities and mobile clinics.
- Provide the additional support required to overcome the gendered differences in education outcomes post COVID-19:
 - » Provide online education and distance learning to avoid long absences and school dropouts for boys and girls. These activities must be combined with alternative print-based approaches to learning (e.g., newspapers) to ensure that children in households without access to technology can continue their education.
 - » Provide special financial assistance and appropriate support to adolescent girls to encourage continuation of schooling.
 - » Provide cash and in-kind support to parents and caregivers to help them administer home-based learning tools and solutions. Also, support adolescent girls in their learning or provide community-based cross-learning opportunities that are conducive to distancing protocols.



Regional government

- Strengthen local capacity to identify, monitor, counsel and protect victims of violence and abuse.
- Provide support and mechanisms for accessing services delivered by the Lao Women's Union and Lao Youth Association.
- Mobilize community workers to raise awareness around protective services, the uptake of essential care and government-led support programmes.
- Mobilize local NGOs to support counselling and protective activities in areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities, as they are more prone to child marriage and child labour.
- Provide outreach to provide psychosocial support to female migrant workers and survivors of GBV, as well as their family members.



Development partners

- Provide technical assistance for the development of a package of emergency response measures, including a family-based cash transfer to mitigate the overall impact of COVID-19 and overcome the potential adverse effects of gendered differences.
- Provide guidance and support to ensure that all COVID-19 responses are gender sensitive and responsive to the needs of women and girls in the short, medium and long-term.



DISCLAIMER

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