



IMPACT OF COVID-19

# SAFEGUARDING WOMEN'S HEALTH AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



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# BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the depth and extent of gender inequalities that persist in many societies across the globe. The gendered impact of COVID-19 can be seen across every sphere implicated in the pandemic. First, compared to “regular” financial and economic recessions, which tend to affect men’s employment more severely, the job losses brought on by social distancing measures, border closures, and lockdowns have a significant impact on sectors with high female employment rates. For instance, in Lao PDR women make up most of the workforce in the garment and tourism industries, both of which suffered severe external shocks. Second, the closure of schools and day care centres have significantly increased childcare needs, which mainly affects working mothers and adolescent girls. Third, while early evidence suggests that men are more at risk of dying from COVID-19 than women, the diversion of financial and human resources away from sexual and reproductive health services adversely affect women and girls’ wellbeing. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic and its corresponding mitigation measures have significantly increased women and girls’ exposure to gender-based violence (GBV). According to our recent discussions with stakeholders, Lao PDR has not been exempted from this trend. In cases when GBV occur, restrictions on movement mean that victims will face challenges accessing protection shelters and health care services. Furthermore, quarantine measures and school closures confine adolescent girls to spaces where they are in direct contact with potential perpetrators.<sup>1</sup>

Gender inequities manifest across all ages in Lao PDR, with the highest gaps in adolescence and adulthood, where gender roles become more permanent. As women in adulthood grapple with the deprivations from earlier life stages and find themselves limited by gender roles and traditional social norms, these differences and inequities become more pronounced. Quarantine measures present several risks in societies where gender discrimination persists, such as in Lao PDR, including the following:

- Household-level stressors such as loss of income, employment and livelihoods combined with women’s limited bargaining power make them highly susceptible to verbal, emotional and physical abuse.
- When GBV does occur, it will be even harder for survivors to access healthcare services (which are already limited in rural areas) due to travel restrictions.
- Quarantine measures and school closures can increase the risk of adolescent girls to different forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>2</sup>
- The lockdown measures place many women and children in confined spaces with perpetrators, leaving them with few opportunities to escape and thus, at greater risk of violence and abuse.

For women of reproductive age, women’s rights are often intertwined with the rights of children and their role as caregivers. While women’s role as primary caregivers is critical to long-term growth and development, it is often at the cost of women’s rights to opportunities, agency, and empowerment. In this section, we explore women as individuals and productive citizens as well as caregivers. As women juggle domestic responsibilities with income generation activities, the burden on women with children or in caregiving positions is likely to increase dramatically. Women in Lao PDR, especially those of reproductive age, are affected in multiple ways due to COVID-19.

The gendered impact of COVID-19 will undoubtedly undermine efforts made by governments, NGOs, civil society and social movements regarding SDG 5, to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

<sup>1</sup> Fraser, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Fraser, 2020

# 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% of female employment is in the agricultural sector, 26.9% is in the services sector, and 8.8% is in the industries sector. Of the total employed females, over 87.5% 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.
- » **Loss of income risks reversing progress for women's agency and empowerment.** Women are at grave risk of losing independent income, which undermines their development outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the depth and extent of gender inequalities that persist in many societies across the globe.
- » **Women's caregiving responsibilities are set to multiply their burden during the lockdowns.** Gender inequalities and roles have intensified<sup>3</sup> 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.

## Education

- » **Keeping girls in school has been recognised as essential to reducing early marriages.** School closures coupled with the economic burden and uncertainty for poor and vulnerable households run the risk of reversing decades of improvements in this area. Many girls may never return to school as they assume domestic responsibilities or are married.



<sup>3</sup> Based on KII discussions

## Child Marriage

- » Organisations working on reducing child marriages have estimated that an additional four million girls are at risk of child marriage in the next two years due to the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>4</sup>
- » **Unmarried adolescent girls and women typically experience challenges accessing reproductive and sexual health care services.** Although these services are currently operating at normal levels, Ministry of Health (MoH) data show a decline in new contraception users (15%) between January and April this year, compared to 2018 and 2019.<sup>5</sup> Consultations with development partners working with adolescents reveal that gender and social norms put sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services at high risk of being deprioritised, which could lead to an increase in unplanned pregnancies, child marriages, and unsafe abortions.
- » **In Lao PDR, the traditional practices of child and forced marriages for labour or money further increases the risk of these practices being used to combat the economic distress resulting from COVID-19.**<sup>6</sup> Child marriages are more common in families with minority ethnic group backgrounds, from rural areas and with mothers and caregivers with lower education levels. In these communities, caregivers often believe that girls are ready for marriage at around age 14.<sup>7</sup>

## Sexual and reproductive health

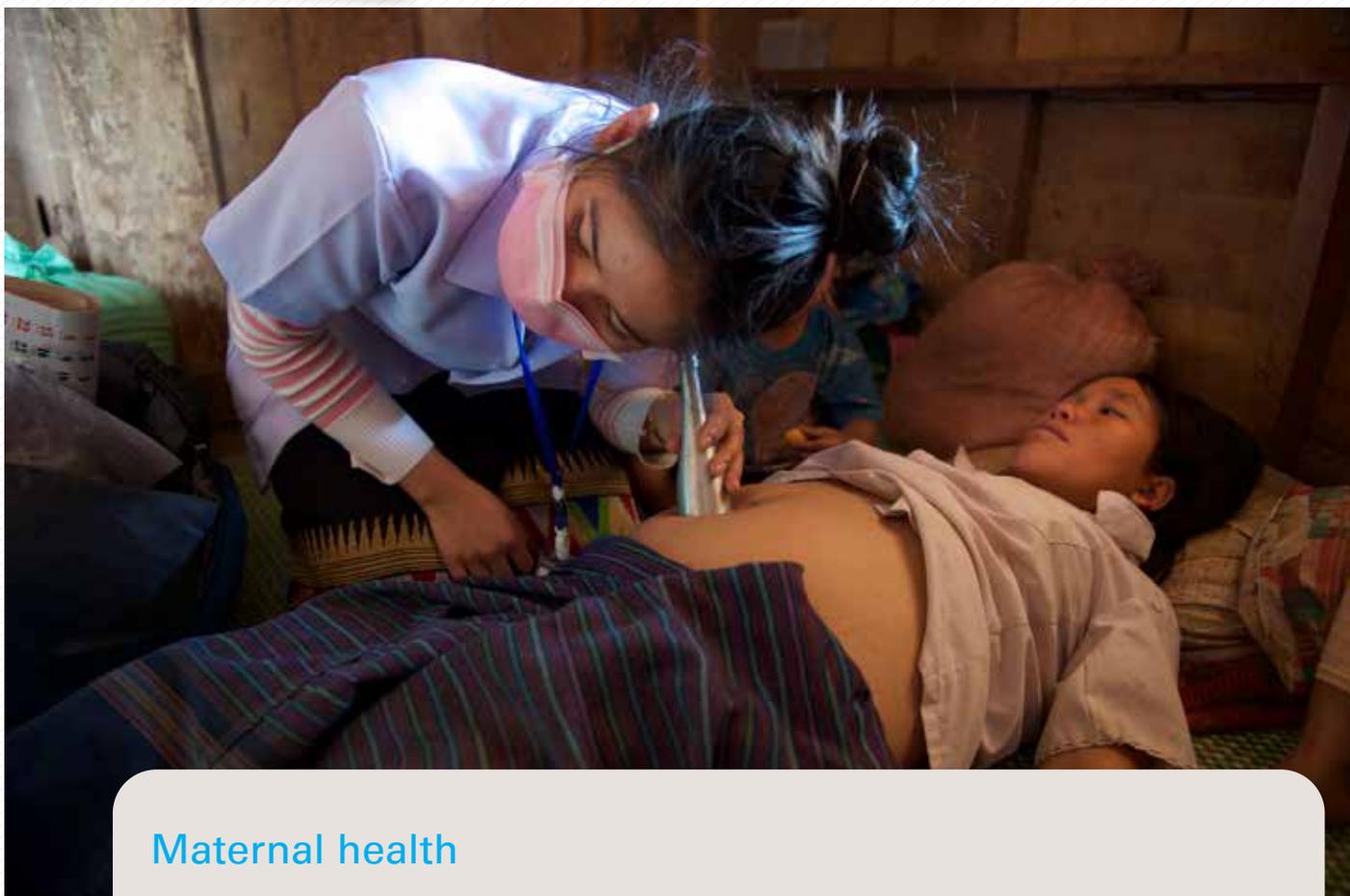
- » The inadequate provision of SRH services and the stigmatisation of sexual health care for adolescents were issues made worse by the pandemic. The lack of capacity and interest in delivering SRH services can reduce both demand and supply for essential care, leaving many young girls at risk of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions.
- » The microsimulation model predicts a reduction of contraception prevalence from the baseline of 59.92 per cent to 55.77 per cent in a high-impact scenario. Unplanned pregnancies increase the chances of child marriage which lead to higher school dropout rates, placing adolescent girls in a cyclical trap.
- » Due to COVID-19, UNFPA estimates an increase in the number of unintended pregnancies by 15.46 per cent (44,322) in the best-case scenario, and potentially by up to 23.9 per cent (68,541) in 2020-2021 based on the extrapolation of administrative data. Of these unintended pregnancies, 35 per cent are expected to occur among females 15 to 24 years of age.

<sup>4</sup> Batha, Coronavirus could put 4 million girls at risk of child marriage, 2020

<sup>5</sup> MoH, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Girls Not Brides, 2018

<sup>7</sup> Rigby, 2013



### Maternal health

- » According to recent estimates by UNFPA, maternal deaths are expected to increase by 92 per cent in the best-case scenario and by 140 per cent in the worst-case scenario, a range representing 262 to 400 more maternal deaths.

### Child abuse and gender-based violence

- » Instances of child sexual abuse have increased amidst COVID-19 due to the associated lockdown measures. The number of reported rape cases has increased as have the counselling requests for girls under the age of 18 who have been sexually exploited, mainly by family members. Victims often display feelings of depression, trauma, fear and anxiety.
- » Discussions with hotline counsellors revealed that many women and young girls experience various forms of violence in Lao PDR. For married women, the primary source of conflict that leads to physical and emotional abuse is the distribution of household income. As financial insecurity increases, spousal tensions are likely to increase in many households across Lao PDR, increasing the risk of experiencing emotional and physical abuse.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



## National government

- Mainstream gender equity in all national-level response programmes and focus on gender sensitivity of all interventions.
- Provide cash-based support to families with children, since parents may no longer be able to engage in economic activities as they are busy caring for children who are no longer in school. These interventions are especially important in single-parent households.
- Ensure that domestic violence shelters are declared essential services and increase the mobilisation of financial resources to these shelters as well as to civil society and advocacy groups that lead efforts in this area.
- 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 cuts for industries dominated by women-owned businesses.
- Ensure that adequate resources are being channelled to ensure the continuity of sexual and reproductive health care services.
- Strengthen the rule of law to prevent gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation.
- Ensure that programmes, including education initiatives, support and encourage the participation of girls.
- Invest in the resilience of the female workforce through long-term social protection programmes or safety nets.



## Regional government

- Strengthen local capacity to identify, monitor, advise and protect victims of violence and abuse.
- Provide support and mechanisms for accessing services delivered by the Lao PDR Women and Lao PDR Youth Associations.
- Mobilise community workers to raise awareness on protective services, the uptake of essential care and government-led support programmes.
- Mobilise 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 psychosocial support for female migrant workers, survivors of GBV and other family members who may require support.



## Development partners

- Use a gender lens to support decision making, planning and implementation to build back better, especially at local levels, using a people-focused approach to Leave No One Behind (LNOB).
- Provide training and orientation for health and social sector staff to further gender responsiveness/ SRHR, GBV prevention and women's rights.
- Strengthen coordination and referral mechanisms for GBV.



#### **DISCLAIMER**

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