

# IN THE SHADOWS OF POWER: WOMEN EXPOSING INJUSTICE AND FIGHTING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN LAOS

SEPTEMBER 2024





Joint Civil Society CEDAW Shadow Report to be considered by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), during its 89th session (7-25 October 2024).

### **Submission by**

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## A. INTRODUCTION

We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Civil Society CEDAW Shadow Report, which will be reviewed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) during its 89th session from October 7-25, 2024. This report, focusing on the situation in Laos, represents our collective efforts to highlight critical issues and advocate for gender equality.

[Manushya Foundation](#) was founded in 2017 as an Intersectional Feminist organisation 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.

**Power by Keyboard** (ຂຸບເຄືອນດ້ວຍຄືບອັດ) was created by pro-democracy youth in March 2022 and advocates for true democracy while criticising 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.

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. KEY CONCERNS

### Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Relation to the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic, Recovery Efforts and Global Crises (articles 3, 11, 12 & 14)

1. The Lao government's amended Law on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases and the National Strategy of Social Protection, fall short of addressing the deep-rooted systemic failures. The government's claims of effective crisis management are exposed as a gross misrepresentation, given that the estimated excess mortality from COVID-19 far exceeds the official death toll.<sup>1</sup> This discrepancy reveals shortcomings in both reporting and crisis response. Moreover, Laos' persistent reliance on high-risk Chinese loans—despite available international debt relief initiatives—has entrenched the country in a debt cycle, exacerbating its financial crisis.<sup>2</sup>
2. With a significant presence in informal, poorly regulated, and lower-paying jobs, particularly in rural areas, women are left incredibly exposed to pandemic-related disruptions. Lockdowns and social distancing measures have ravaged their livelihoods, as informal workers are deprived of social security, health benefits, and financial safety nets. The resultant economic turmoil has led to an increase in domestic violence, leaving women trapped in abusive situations.<sup>3</sup> Data reveals a staggering 3-5 times increase in calls for counselling during strict lockdown periods. Disturbingly, there was a rise in cases of sexual abuse involving children, particularly girls, closely linked to the pandemic's lockdowns. The increase in reported rapes and requests for counseling from sexually exploited girls under 18—often at the hands of relatives—underscores a crisis of staggering neglect. Historical trends indicate that economic downturns lead to a rise in child and forced marriages, suggesting that this crisis may have similar consequences.<sup>4</sup>

#### 3. **The government must:**

- Overhaul its crisis management strategy by ensuring full transparency in COVID-19 reporting and implementing rigorous systems.
- Reassess its debt strategy by focusing on international debt relief to stabilise the economy and redirect resources to social protection programs.
- Expand access to healthcare, financial aid, and protection services against domestic violence, with immediate and targeted support for women.

## Access to Justice & Temporary Measures (articles 2, 11 & 15)

4. The legal framework in Laos is a flagrant failure in securing justice for women. While the government trumpets its efforts to inform women of their rights through laws and conventions such as the Legal Aid Decree No. 77/Gov, these are nothing more than propaganda when juxtaposed with their dismal implementation—or lack thereof. Speaking of access to justice, the government's so-called temporary measures for advancing gender equality among high-level officials, especially within the judiciary, are a mere facade. This lack of effective action shows a deep disregard for real progress.
5. For instance, 76% of courts lack basic facilities such as toilets with sanitary napkin dispensers or breastfeeding rooms. Additionally, 71% of courts do not provide accessible remote hearings for impoverished stakeholders, compounded by inadequate infrastructure for virtual proceedings. Furthermore, 63% of courts lack procedures for handling urgent cases, exposing gaps in case management and accessibility. Resource allocation for gender equality is also critically insufficient with 70% of participants believing funds for gender equality strategies are rarely available, and 72% feel resources for addressing gender-related misconduct are nearly non-existent. Recent cases illustrate this phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> In one instance, women working in a hotel were degraded as human targets in a ring-toss game for clients.<sup>6</sup> Another case involved the mysterious death of P.I., echoing another unresolved dismemberment case in the same region.<sup>7</sup> Despite public outrage, authorities took minimal action and offered little transparency, allowing these exploitative practices to continue unchecked.
6. Accountability mechanisms are inadequate as well. Over half of participants report that mechanisms to address inappropriate behaviours are rare or absent. Additionally, 65% of participants say measures to hold judges and managers accountable for gender-related issues are often ineffective. Training on gender equality and diversity is insufficient; 53% of court employees lack training on gender discrimination, and 67% find mandatory training on gender equality rarely available. Programs also inadequately cover diversity issues affecting LGBTQI+ and disabled women.<sup>8</sup> The case of N.P. at a 'Parliamentary Committee' conference in April 2024 exemplifies this critical failure. Her assailant not only sexually harassed and assaulted her but also used his governmental authority to intimidate her further, asserting that he could legally retaliate and cause more harm. To protect herself and her family, N.P. fled to Bangkok, seeking refuge from retribution, but remains a target of transnational repression, facing harassment and disbelief from teachers, hotel staff, local authorities, the Lao Women's Union, and even her fellow students. This situation highlights a shocking lack of accountability for those in power. The government's failure to take action against

such perpetrators reveals a deep-rooted problem where influential figures escape justice, discouraging women from coming forward and reinforcing a cycle of oppression.<sup>9</sup> Her case underscores the urgent need for an overhaul of protection mechanisms for women, especially those who defy the 'ideal' victim stereotype. Laos' inadequate support for traditional victims is already a failure; failing to support women like N.P., who are educated and vocal, exacerbates the issue and entrenches barriers to women's leadership.<sup>10</sup>

#### 7. **The government must:**

- Overhaul the justice system by implementing enforceable policies, equipping courts with gender-sensitive facilities, and ensuring remote hearing accessibility.
- Increase funding for gender equality initiatives and provide robust support for women's organisations.
- Establish effective accountability mechanisms and ensure mandatory gender sensitivity training for all public officials.
- Enforce existing laws and introduce new legislation to address gender discrimination with thorough and transparent investigations.
- Cease all forms of transnational repression (TNR), especially on foreign soil such as Thailand. It must ensure the protection of Women Human Rights Defenders, activists, dissidents and refugees who have fled Laos and guarantee their physical and psychological safety both at home and abroad.

#### **National Human Rights Institution (Article 2, 4 & 12)**

8. The government's refusal to establish a national human rights institution (NHRI) in accordance with the 1993 Paris Principles is a shocking display of its disregard for international human rights standards. By dismissing the NHRI as incompatible with "current realities", the government is essentially admitting to its reluctance to improve human rights protections. Moreover, Decree No. 238 represents a severe crackdown on civil society, effectively criminalising their activities, restricting foreign funding, and permitting arbitrary dissolutions of organisations. This draconian decree is a deliberate tool of oppression, designed to suffocate any dissent.
9. **Ah, the government's real agenda: equal-opportunity persecution for those who won't shut up.** The government's oppressive measures have created a hostile environment for women who dare to raise their voices. Women like H.X., who was

sentenced to five years in prison and fined heavily for criticising government corruption on social media, suffer severe consequences for speaking out. Similarly, L.T. and her colleagues were handed harsh prison sentences for the audacious act of protesting and expressing dissent. Men are assassinated at alarming rates, but don't worry, ladies—there's plenty of persecution to go around, from transnational repression to enforced disappearance. As the government fumbles with COVID and traffic victim statistics, it somehow manages to have a flawless system for identifying and punishing dissenters.<sup>11</sup> Laos' dismal rankings—153/180<sup>12</sup> for press freedom and a Freedom House score of just 13/100<sup>13</sup>—underscore the stifling of free expression and civic participation. The government's refusal to establish an NHRI and its persistent repression of female voices reveal a blatant disregard for human rights.

#### 10. **The government must:**

- Establish immediately a national human rights institution compliant with the Paris Principles, ending its disgraceful neglect of women's rights.
- Dismantle Decree No. 238, which brutally suppresses civil society organisations.
- Lift the repressive media and civil society restrictions that silence women's voices and obstruct real progress on gender equality.

#### **Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) (Article 3, 6, 9 & 11)**

11. The Lao government's assault on fundamental freedoms—such as freedom of speech, peaceful assembly, and public participation—is a blatant affront to human rights and justice. While the government boasts about the technicalities of registering social organisations, it fundamentally ignores the real issues of arbitrary arrests, brutal detentions, intimidation, and enforced disappearances. Their so-called adherence to laws and procedures is nothing but a smokescreen to legitimise their ongoing repression and stifle genuine dissent. By presenting their restrictive measures as lawful, they cynically twist legal frameworks to crush any form of opposition to their authoritarian regime and maintain their grip on power.<sup>14</sup>
12. The situation for WHRD is especially outrageous. The government's savage crackdown on those who dare to challenge its corrupt and abusive policies shows a chilling disregard for basic human decency. Take, for example, H.X. arrested in September 2019 for daring to expose government corruption. Sentenced to five years in prison on trumped-up charges of defamation and anti-State propaganda, her case demonstrates the brutal reprisals faced by anyone who exposes the regime.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the government's blatant disregard for victims and their families is unforgivable. The cases of S.N. and P.D., the wives of missing activists, have been left



in the dark despite numerous requests for information for years. This neglect further reveals the government's utter contempt for its citizens' suffering and their right to justice.<sup>16</sup>

13. The attack on digital freedoms is equally horrifying. The Lao government has turned vague and repressive laws against defamation and "false information" into weapons to silence online criticism, with WHRD bearing the brunt of this attack. The 2015 Law on Prevention and Combating Cyber Crime, which broadly defines "deceptive" content, is an example of how the government uses legal means to crush free expression and tighten its grip on public discourse. The case of the three Hmong minors—Z.H., K.V., and M.V.—along with V.H., who vanished on March 12, 2020, is a grim testament to the government's barbarity. Their vehicle was discovered abandoned with two bodies inside showing signs of torture. The three minors remain missing, a horrifying indication of the lengths the government will go to in order to enforce its brutal rule and eliminate dissent through fear and violence.<sup>17</sup>

14. **The government must:**

- Dismantle immediately its repressive legal framework and align with international human rights standards.
- Repeal draconian laws criminalising peaceful expression and assembly, and end all arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and digital repression.
- Release all unjustly detained activists, provide reparations and transparency to victims' families, and enforce robust protections for WHRDs.
- Promote and protect women human rights defenders and their work, in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

**Gender Stereotypes (Articles 5, 10, 11 & 14)**

15. The Lao government's initiatives to address gender stereotypes through training and curriculum changes are insufficient. Despite claims of progress, these measures do not effectively challenge the deep-rooted cultural norms and systemic barriers that sustain gender inequality. Training sessions are superficial steps that fail to confront the entrenched stereotypes obstructing women's access to education and economic opportunities. The government's efforts do not adequately address the core issues of gender-based discrimination and violence.<sup>18</sup>

16. An emerging area of concern is the intersection of gender stereotypes with technology. While digital innovations offer potential benefits for women, such as the ability to overcome mobility restrictions, restrictive norms and gain financial independence, they also reflect and reinforce existing gender biases. Women face challenges such as lower education levels and entrenched household responsibilities tied to traditional gender roles. Gender stereotypes further compound these issues, as digital skills are culturally associated with men.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, women may find it more difficult to enter digital fields. Indeed, enrollment rates among girls in vocational schools and higher education, particularly in non-traditional fields such as technology, are disproportionately low.<sup>20</sup>
17. Moreover, the government fails to acknowledge the risks associated with the misuse of technology, disproportionately affecting women with lower literacy levels and limited access to non-traditional skills. They may experience exploitation and deprivation, including technology-facilitated sexual violence.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, they are at risk of becoming entangled in cyber-scam operations, such as those run by the Kings Romans Group, further exacerbating their vulnerability and leading to severe consequences for their safety and well-being.<sup>22</sup>

18. **The government must:**

- Prioritise reshaping cultural norms by integrating gender-sensitive education from an early age and promoting shared responsibilities in domestic and professional roles.
- Expand access to digital skills and financial resources for women without delay.
- Enforce legal protections against exploitation more strictly and launch targeted campaigns to challenge and dismantle ingrained stereotypes and biases.

### Gender Based Violence (Articles 3, 4, 7 & 15)

19. The Lao government's efforts to address gender-based violence (GBV) through the 2015 Law and National Action Plan are noted but insufficient. Despite claims of progress, the government did not even mention the growing issue of technology-facilitated GBV (TF GBV). Existing measures are already insufficient for offline GBV, and there is a complete lack of provisions for TF GBV, highlighting the urgent need for a more comprehensive approach.
20. Research revealed that about 1/3 women in Laos have experienced violence in intimate relationships and 30% believed that domestic violence could be justified when women failed to conform to gender norms.<sup>23</sup> Compounding this issue, regional

data reveal a significant increase in violence against women and girls during humanitarian crises and economic downturns.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as society increasingly relies on technology, the avenues for perpetrating violence have expanded to TF GBV. TF GBV often occurs on a continuum, where actions that begin in the digital space can escalate to offline GBV and vice versa. However, it is complex to measure the impact of (TF) GBV on women. Research highlights a significant gap between the government's reported efforts and the reality on the ground. Many victims do not seek help from authorities, citing limited awareness of available options, perceived gaps in the law, fear of social stigma, repercussions within their families, and a lack of digital literacy education. The absence of a specific law addressing TF GBV and the inadequate training of law enforcement further reinforce this phenomenon.<sup>25</sup>

#### 21. **The government must:**

- Enforce rigorously the 2015 Law on Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Children and introduce targeted laws against TF GBV.
- Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge entrenched gender norms, boost digital literacy, and address the needs of vulnerable groups.
- Provide mandatory training for law enforcement to effectively handle GBV cases, ensuring better reporting and serious case management.

### Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (Articles 6, 7, 8 & 10)

22. Despite initiatives like training programs, awareness campaigns, the 2016 Anti-Trafficking Law, and the 2018 Penal Code (Article 215), the situation remains severe. These measures, though comprehensive in theory, fail to address root causes like extreme economic hardship, which drives many women and girls into exploitative situations.<sup>26</sup>
23. In 2024, the government's response to the crisis of forced online scamming, human trafficking and sexual exploitation was insufficient, particularly in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ). The GTSEZ is infamous for its scam centres and sexual exploitation, where victims—many trafficked from Laos—are coerced into labour, subjected to physical punishment, and forced into scamming operations. Despite the well-documented scale of these abuses, the government identified 25 victims out of the 2,614 vulnerable workers removed from the GTSEZ between 2022 and 2023. This identification rate is alarming given the removal of 4,416 potential victims during this period. Authorities routinely dismiss trafficking cases as "labor disputes" with no prosecutions reported for SEZ trafficking.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, low-level officials are

implicated in trafficking, facilitating exploitation through falsified documents. Further complicating matters, the new Bokeo International Airport, next to the GTSEZ and reportedly criminally funded, has no reported anti-trafficking measures. Although 45 trafficking cases were investigated in 2023 and 170 police personnel were deployed in the CTSEZ, the authorities' failure to provide transparency has significantly limited the effectiveness of these efforts, leading to no noticeable improvements.<sup>28</sup> These systemic failures are underscored by a May 2024 admission from a Lao Ministry of Public Security official, who highlighted the severe lack of resources needed to combat these crimes. This, coupled with the government's slow and ineffective responses, exacerbated by bureaucratic inertia, has allowed trafficking and sexual exploitation to persist unabated.<sup>29</sup>

#### 24. **The government must:**

- Overhaul victim identification and support systems to address economic desperation driving crime.
- Revamp law enforcement data, prosecutions, and oversight, particularly at new facilities like Bokeo International Airport.
- Increase resources and strengthen partnerships with anti-trafficking organisations to ensure policy promises lead to real outcomes.
- Abandon half-measures and superficial fixes, tackling injustices with the urgency and effectiveness required.

### The Absence of Genuine Political Participation in One-Party System (Articles 2, 3, 4 & 5)

25. The Lao government's so-called efforts to ensure female participation in leadership roles are laughable when set against the backdrop of the Laos People's Revolutionary Party's (LPRP) authoritarian grip. The reality is that their "gender equality plans" are a pathetic attempt to distract from their systematic suppression of political dissent and genuine democratic engagement.<sup>30</sup> This isn't a case of ineffective governance but a deliberate assault on the very principles of democracy and human dignity.
26. The LPRP's control over the political system ensures that women, particularly those from rural areas who make up 80% of the population, remain voiceless and powerless. The so-called representation is a farce—only 21.9% of National Assembly seats were won by women in 2021, and even these seats are largely held by urban elites, leaving rural women completely excluded from meaningful participation. Ethnic minority women, such as those from the Hmong and Khmu communities, face entrenched discrimination. The government's neglect of their specific needs is a blatant violation of their rights. This exclusion is not an accident; it is a calculated strategy to keep these

communities marginalised and out of politics. Women with disabilities are crushed under this regime. The lack of proper legal protections and support means they face barriers to political participation, adding another layer of exclusion by the government. Women in the LGBTQI+ community suffer under an oppressive regime that not only ignores but actively erases their existence by failing to recognise LGBTQI+ rights. The absence of legal protections force individuals to hide their identities and endure constant fear. In addition to these injustices, the Lao government imposes severe restrictions on online freedoms through vague defamation and libel laws. For instance, in March 2023, police in Houaphanh province coerced a woman to retract and apologise for a Facebook post alleging she paid US \$4,500 for a police job. This forced apology highlights the government’s tactics to stifle dissent and control public discourse.<sup>31</sup>

**27. The government must:**

- End its abuse of power through the implementation of strong anti-discrimination laws and a comprehensive reform of the political system for true representation.
- Guarantee the protection of every individual’s rights and hold perpetrators accountable.
- Revise its policies to end the brutal suppression of its people and address injustices with urgency and effectiveness.

**Education, Employment and Migrant Workers (Articles 10, 11, 12 & 14)**

28. The Lao government’s legal frameworks for education, employment, and migrant workers have made some progress, aiming to enhance gender equality, labour protections, and worker skills. However, despite these policies, their implementation is lacking. In education, although initiatives exist to promote girls’ education and self-reliance, poor execution undermines their effectiveness. Similarly, while labour laws and minimum wage increases are in place, gaps in enforcement leave many workers unprotected. Legal protections for migrant workers are also insufficiently enforced, leading to ongoing exploitation.

29. In 2023, data showed that Lao girls outperformed boys in foundational skills, with performance ratios of 1.09 in reading and 1.16 in numeracy for younger grades. Despite this, gender-based segregation persists in higher education, reinforcing stereotypes.<sup>32</sup> While women comprised 43% of TVET students in 2017, they remain concentrated in traditionally female fields. Economic hardship worsens these

challenges.<sup>33</sup> By May 2024, inflation hit 26%, driving school dropout rates up, with middle school graduations dropping from 83,000 to 68,800 in 2024. Girls are often pulled from school to support households, and even graduates face gender discrimination in a shrinking job market. In regions like PiaHuaNam, girls further struggle with inadequate resources, early marriages, and limited access to education, issues ignored by the President’s focus on abstract values.<sup>34</sup>

30. These educational challenges translate into economic realities, with 52% of women employed but earning only 77% of men’s average wages in Vientiane. They also bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, spending 13.2% of their time on domestic tasks compared to 9.2% for men, limiting their opportunities for paid employment.<sup>35</sup> The high migration rate—women constitute nearly 56% of Laotian migrants—underscores the severe economic pressures. Among the 303,391 Laotian workers employed overseas, a substantial number are women. In Thailand, approximately 70,000 of the 228,000 Laotians work without permits, exposing them to higher risks like debt bondage, human trafficking and exploitation due to the high upfront costs of migration, such as travel expenses and recruitment fees.<sup>36</sup> Despite contributing over \$426 million annually in remittances, many return to Laos facing unemployment and lacking legal aid.<sup>37</sup>

31. **The government must:**

- Strengthen enforcement of education policies to lower dropout rates and support girls in regions like PiaHuaNam, who face significant economic and social barriers.
- Close gaps in labour law enforcement and tackle gender pay disparity to ensure fair employment practices.
- Enhance protections for migrant workers, particularly those without legal permits, to combat exploitation effectively.
- Increase support for women in the workforce and address the burden of unpaid care work to improve their economic opportunities and overall well-being.

**Health (Articles 2, 12, 14 & 15)**

32. Laos has established several laws to support the right to health, including the 2023 Law on Public Health, which addresses universal health care and the 2021 Decree on Public Health Service Personnel to improve the training of health care providers. Despite these laws, gaps in implementation and enforcement continue to result in disparities and substandard health outcomes.<sup>38</sup>

33. In 2024, approximately 28% of adults rated the quality of healthcare facilities as poor with dissatisfaction in equipment (35%), waiting times (24%), provider knowledge (23%), and provider respect (23%). Additionally, 12% of adults reported experiencing discrimination during treatment, with higher rates among young women. Mon-Khmer women, in particular, reported higher rates of unmet need for care compared to Lao-tai women.<sup>39</sup> While access to maternal health services has improved, significant disparities persist. For instance, between 2006 and 2017, there was a 42.7% increase in the coverage of at least one antenatal care visit from skilled personnel. However, the increase was most substantial among the least favoured subgroups: Hmong women (37.1%), rural women (36.1%), and poor women (31.1%). Institutional delivery rates also saw improvement. Nonetheless, substantial gaps remain, particularly between the poorest and richest women, with the Hmong experiencing lower coverage compared to Lao women. Moreover, ethnic minority women face additional barriers, including discrimination by healthcare providers and cultural challenges, which further hinder their access to care.<sup>40</sup>
34. Beyond maternal health, disparities in healthcare persist. For example, Hmong-Mien children are less likely to receive hepatitis B vaccinations compared to Lao-Tai children. This disparity is driven by geographic isolation, economic hardship, and cultural barriers, complicating vaccine distribution and access to care. Socio-economic challenges and a historical mistrust of authorities exacerbate these issues.<sup>41</sup>
35. **The government must:**
- Improve enforcement of the legal framework to ensure better healthcare access and equity.
  - Expand maternal and child health services, especially for marginalised groups such as Hmong women and ethnic minorities who face significant barriers.
  - Ensure equitable vaccine distribution and address socio-economic and cultural factors contributing to healthcare disparities.

### Economic and Social Benefits (Article 9, 11, 13 & 15)

36. The right to social security is reflected in Laos' National Social Protection Strategy towards 2025, which includes health insurance, social security, and social welfare. The amended Law on Social Security (2018) addresses some aspects but lacks details on service provider locations, claims procedures, and specific provisions for persons with disabilities or informal workers. Upcoming revisions to the Law on Social Security and the Law on Health Insurance, expected in late 2024, aim to establish a more comprehensive and effective framework, though specifics are still pending.<sup>42</sup>

37. Access to social security in Laos is notably inadequate, particularly for rural and informal workers. Research highlighted that infrastructure deficiencies in remote areas severely hinder access to social protection. By 2020, it was confirmed that many informal workers, who often face irregular incomes, struggle to meet even the lowest contribution levels. Additionally, the Voluntary Social Security scheme had only 5,591 members out of 1.3 million informal workers in 2017, increasing to just 15,136 by 2020. This represents less than 1% of informal workers. Many low-income workers, who are in greatest need of social protection, are thus left unprotected. Furthermore, the perception of poor service quality, cumbersome benefit procedures, and limited access to social security offices—restricted to only 8 district offices within 7 provinces, plus central and provincial offices—compounds these issues. There are no available statistics on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, indicating a significant oversight in addressing their needs.<sup>43</sup>

38. **The government must:**

- Expand infrastructure and services in rural areas, ensuring better integration of informal workers into the social security system.
- Revise the Law on Social Security and the Law on Health Insurance to include detailed provisions for persons with disabilities and streamline benefit claims.
- Increase outreach and improve the quality of social security services to enhance accessibility and effectiveness for all workers.

**Rural Women (Articles 5, 14, 15 & 16)**

39. The government claims that Land Law No. 70 ensures equal land use rights for all, but this assertion is undermined by discriminatory practices. The lack of official recognition for Indigenous Peoples (IP) and failures in enforcing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) principles reveal a legal framework that is both poorly executed and discriminatory. Consequently, Indigenous women (IW) represent a particularly vulnerable subset of rural women and are conveniently left out of the government's response—because why deal with uncomfortable truths when it's easier to pretend they don't exist?

40. Reports indicate that IP Women remain disproportionately disadvantaged. Land dispossession is a significant problem, particularly with the expansion of hydroelectric dams and mining operations. Recent examples include the Hydropower Dams Projects, Lao-China Railway Project, Luang Prabang Dam Project, Pak Lay Dam Project, Ban Yeup Village, New Military Camp Project, Sino Agri International Potash Co



Project, Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy Dam Collapse, and Phengxay Import-Export Company.<sup>44</sup> These cases have led to forced relocations, inadequate compensation, loss of traditional lands, detention, allegations of abuse, and heightened economic and social vulnerabilities for IW. This phenomenon is enabled by the government's refusal to officially recognise IP as distinct from other ethnic groups, severely limiting IW's ability to exercise their rights and access resources.<sup>45</sup> Parallely, the absence of FPIC in such projects represents a major concern for IW. This principle ensures that communities are fully aware of the potential impacts and have the opportunity to participate in the project. The lack of FPIC means that IW, who are often responsible for managing household resources and agricultural activities, are systematically excluded from decision-making activities that affect their lands and livelihoods.<sup>46</sup>

41. The recent repeal of Decree 84 and its replacement by the Law on Settlement and Occupation represents a serious setback for IP Women. Decree 84 established important guidelines for fair compensation and effective resettlement. The new law, which centralises government control and offers vague guidelines for resettlement, betrays those who are already struggling. Additionally, it gives the government more power to displace communities based on its own interests, highlighting a disgraceful abandonment of responsibility and revealing a complete lack of justice.<sup>47</sup> Adding to this outrage is the ongoing corruption and poor management that plague the compensation process. IP Women, already disadvantaged, must now deal with a bureaucratic maze designed to frustrate and deny their claims. The government's empty promises of support are rendered meaningless by widespread corruption, which prevents them from receiving fair compensation. This negligence not only worsens their economic hardships but also deepens social inequalities, showing a shocking disregard for their basic rights.<sup>48</sup>

42. **The government must:**

- Implement and enforce formal recognition of IP and adhere strictly to the FPIC in all projects.
- Restore Decree 84 and eradicate the rampant corruption in compensation processes.
- Ensure fair and just treatment for IP Women, ending systemic exploitation and neglect that have exacerbated their suffering.

## Women Facing Multiple and Intersecting Forms of Discrimination (Articles 2, 12, 14 & 16)

43. In Laos, the criminalisation of sex work has created a dangerous environment for women. The lack of supportive framework only makes things worse, leaving sex workers at risk of abuse and legal trouble. This persistent injustice has been allowed to fester for years, denying these individuals the protection and rights they need.<sup>49</sup>
44. The harsh reality for sex workers in Laos, especially those from poor rural areas and ethnic minorities, is a direct result of this flawed legal system. Many turn to sex work because it's one of the few ways to make a living. Cultural and religious stigmas only add to their suffering, branding their work as immoral and making it harder for them to get help. Indeed, 86% of sex workers report symptoms of STIs or RTIs, but only 67% seek treatment. The healthcare system further reflects these prejudices: 54% of healthcare providers lack proper training on STIs, and a troubling number of pharmacists (68%), doctors (59%), and nurses (55%) hold negative views about them. This bias, along with long waits and inconvenient clinic locations, creates huge obstacles to getting medical care. The situation for ethnic minorities like the Khmu underscores the urgent need for change in a system that continually fails them.<sup>50</sup>
45. Beyond sex work, women from ethnic minorities face additional discrimination. They are among the most disadvantaged, with only 25% being literate and many not speaking the Lao language, which limits their opportunities and participation in society. Cultural norms and harmful practices, including human trafficking and forced domestic work, further push them to the margins. For example, the Hmong, particularly the ChaoFa Hmong, suffer human rights abuses. Economic projects and foreign investments have led to increased military violence, including disappearances, abuse, and extrajudicial killings. The Hmong-Lu face extreme poverty, making them particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitative marriages.<sup>51</sup> This ongoing crisis highlights a massive failure to address the needs and rights of these marginalised groups.

### 46. **The government must:**

- Create and enforce laws that genuinely protect both sex workers and ethnic minority women.
- Implement immediate and comprehensive reforms to combat discrimination, enhance access to healthcare, and provide real economic opportunities.
- Address ongoing neglect and abuse, upholding the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable by ensuring they receive the protection and support they deserve.

## Marriage and Family Relation (Articles 2, 10, 12 & 16)

47. The 2015 Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children aims to protect family rights but suffers from weak implementation. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive marriage registration exacerbates legal and financial uncertainties for many families. Despite prohibitions on polygamy in the Civil Code and restrictions on marriage under 18 years old in the Penal Code, early marriage persists, with women typically marrying at 19.2 years old.<sup>52</sup>
48. The interplay of inadequate child protection laws and community acceptance of early marriage creates severe challenges in Laos. Research reveals that many pregnancies result from coerced or pressured sex, with 35% of participants reporting non-consensual sexual encounters. Barriers to sexual and reproductive health information and services, coupled with male partners' control over reproductive decisions, lead to high rates of unintended pregnancies. Notably, 42% of pregnancies occur within marital unions, reflecting a community norm that views early marriage as a resolution to premarital pregnancies.<sup>53</sup>
49. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these issues, pushing many young girls into early marriages due to increased financial strain on families. This trend is particularly pronounced among certain ethnic groups and marginalised communities. Additionally, the lack of accurate contraception information contributes to unintended pregnancies and subsequent forced or pressured early marriages. Girls who become pregnant often face marriages driven by community expectations rather than personal choice, leading to further economic and social disadvantages. The inadequate support systems for single mothers and societal acceptance of child marriage perpetuate this cycle of socio-economic vulnerability.<sup>54</sup>

### 50. **The government must:**

- Enhance the enforcement and implementation of child and women protection laws.
- Introduce comprehensive marriage registration to eliminate legal and financial uncertainties.
- Expand access to accurate sexual and reproductive health education and services to reduce early marriages and unintended pregnancies.

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