

Lao PDR: Civil Society Organization and Community Scoping Study

COUNTRY BRIEF



A traditional textile dyer in Lao PDR. Photo credit: Phoonsab.

AMPLIFY

AMPLIFY is a five-year Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiative that addresses the differential impacts of conflicts and human security threats on women in Southeast Asia by advancing their meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The initiative supports the implementation of ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action on WPS and focuses on Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar through policy development, civil society partnerships, and community-level peacebuilding. AMPLIFY is funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and implemented by The Asia Foundation.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a global policy framework recognizing that the meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and decision-making is essential to achieving peace and preventing conflict. Guided by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, the WPS agenda's four pillars – participation, prevention, protection and relief and recovery – emphasize the need to protect and promote women's rights in fragile and conflict settings. AMPLIFY takes a WPS+ approach that applies beyond situations of conflict, addressing human security threats.

Country Briefs

In 2024, AMPLIFY conducted scoping studies across its three implementing countries, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar, to better understand the current challenges faced by women at all levels of society.

In Cambodia and Lao PDR, research combined community surveys, key informant interviews, and civil society organization (CSO) needs assessments. In Myanmar, interviews explored the challenges facing women's rights organizations, women human rights defenders, and activists on both sides of the Thailand–Myanmar border.

These studies were further enhanced by informal consultations with stakeholders and by a Political Economy Analysis, **Securing Women's Peace: A Political Economy Analysis of Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN, Cambodia, Lao PDR and the Philippines**, conducted in early 2025.

The country briefs that follow draw on this research to present key findings and insights most relevant for WPS programming. They are intended as a resource for CSOs, policymakers, and donors, and form part of AMPLIFY's ongoing commitment to build and share knowledge on WPS in the region.



Lao PDR

- Context of Women, Peace and Security in Lao PDR
- Civil Society Organization's Experience in WPS
- Labor Migration and Human Trafficking
- Natural Resource Management
- AMPLIFY's Approach



Lao PDR



Context of Women, Peace and Security in Lao PDR

The Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) is a recently introduced and implemented framework in Lao PDR; however, its core principles are not entirely new or unfamiliar. Instead, WPS builds on work that has already taken place in Lao PDR to address women's physical and economic security and rights. In 1981, the government of Lao PDR ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which provided the normative groundwork for considerations of women's meaningful participation in all forms of decision-making that the WPS agenda has since enhanced by linking women's participation with peace and security. Since then, fragmented work relating to WPS has existed, although it has been framed in various ways, such as efforts to advance equality, women's empowerment, and women's leadership. With the recent entry of the WPS agenda as a formal framework, different stakeholders in Lao PDR (including the government, embassies, international organizations, and civil society organizations) understand WPS as an umbrella term for pre-existing women's programming and utilize WPS to navigate through peace and security issues in local contexts.

In Lao PDR, there are government committees, organizations such as the Lao Women's Union, National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mother and Children, Lao Front for National Development, and Women's Caucus and the Ethnic Affairs Committee of the National Assembly that play pivotal roles in advancing women's participation, promoting equality, and safeguarding women's rights. However, it should be noted that despite various policy mandates to include female representation at each level across the country, women's participation remains below benchmarks in central government positions (of 30%), at the provincial level (20%) and the village level (10%), especially for women from marginalized groups as reported in the 2024 CEDAW Concluding Observations report.¹

¹ CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). 2024. "Concluding observations on the tenth period report of Lao." UN Doc. No. CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/10.

At the community level in Lao PDR, WPS is highly correlated to labor migration within and between Lao PDR and its neighboring countries. The figure below illustrates how Lao labor migrates. These labor flows are often associated with six prominent factors as identified by an AMPLIFY scoping study: violence against women, alcohol/drug use, illegal marriage, high-risk jobs, school dropout and closure, and implementation of business regulations and labor migration.²

Figure 2: Lao Labor Migration Map



² The research was conducted during August-September 2024. The produced reports are for internal circulation within The Asia Foundation and are not intended for external distribution.



Civil Society Organization's Experience in Women, Peace and Security

Syphone works for a civil society organization, and she is passionate about building a sustainable livelihood for ethnic communities.

In working with ethnic communities—especially women—she recalled that **“Women in rural area are shy and reserved;** hence it’s more challenging to work toward the ideal of women’s participation and leadership. **However, when it comes to implementation, women are no doubt the hardest working of all.”**

CSO members are often on the front lines and must be adaptable when exposed to risks. Syphone gave an example of when one of the projects resulted in unexpected hostility from the community they were working with. **“It was so terrifying,** and we decided **not to be involved directly** in addressing the issue but **through other more subtle means instead.”**

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have gained growing recognition. In recent years, they have been increasingly engaging with donor agencies and government entities to implement community programs, and they have more opportunities to influence and engage larger audiences. One recent example is that since 2023, CSOs in the country can now submit a parallel report to the CEDAW committee annually, signifying meaningful progress toward a more accountable government.

These CSOs work mainly in five sectors: economic empowerment, environmental resilience, law/legal disputes, disaster management, and unexploded ordinance—all of which affect women and girls.

CSOs often navigate complex administrative hurdles and operate in limited spaces. These issues are compounded by **safety concerns** experienced by CSO members when working on WPS and social issues.

Many CSOs have expressed interest in **receiving more support for capacity building**, particularly for improving their English language skills, finance and operations management, proposal writing, and technical knowledge.



Labor Migration and Human Trafficking

Nang is in her early 20s and comes from a subsistence farming family living in the southern part of Lao PDR. Encouraged by her parents, Nang **hopes for and seeks ways to earn more** for herself and her family.

She came across an advertisement on a social media platform seeking young women and promising high pay in the northern part of Lao PDR. She recalled that **“Some of her neighboring parents encouraged their children to leave schools for work or marry for dowries.”** so she asked for pocket money from her parents and relatives. She then headed to Vientiane to work as a waitress in a few restaurants and bars before heading to the special economic zone in the north for higher pay.

Little did she know that she would end up working in the “entertainment” industry and **“...Women, like herself, who live in the border provinces to China and Thailand will face challenges, as buyers of sex workers come from East Asia to Southeast Asia.”**

Labor migration in Lao PDR is **driven by poverty** and the **lack of sufficient paid job opportunities** for young adults in their communities, resulting in men and women experiencing peace and security threats in displaced locations.

Most migrated individuals are young adults aged 21 to 25, followed by 26 to 30, who often leave their children in the care of elderly family members in their hometowns.³ Reports indicate that individuals are enticed by promises of high salaries and often recruited via social media platforms to work in special economic zones—particularly in the north of Lao PDR.

Many become victims of **human trafficking, labor exploitation**, or are **forced into sex work**, particularly women. They are detained through various means such as substance-based control, detainment for ransom, and non-consensual/unlawful seizure of personal documentation, among others. Lao PDR is on the **Tier 2 Watch List** for human trafficking, as almost all cases of potential victims removed from the special

economic zones are **reported as “labor disputes” rather than prosecutions for trafficking.**⁴ In these situations, women often face significant and disproportionate vulnerabilities due to language barriers, limited capital, knowledge, and access to social networks.

³ International Organization for Migration (IOM), Lao People’s Democratic Republic Flow Monitoring Survey Report 2022 (IOM Lao PDR, 2022), 04, <[Flow Monitoring Report 2022.pdf](#)>

⁴ U.S. Department of State (DOS), 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lao PDR (U.S. DOS, 2024), <[Lao PDR - United States Department of State](#)>



Natural Resource Management

Chan is in her 50s and has been living in a semi-remote village near a big lake in the southern part of Lao PDR her whole life.

To support her granddaughter who has been in her care since birth—as her parents moved into city for work—Chan earns a small monthly income by selling skewers and woven floor mats.

She was financially impacted as **her house was flooded last year** by extreme rain that caused the lake to overflow. Recently, she heard from the village authority that the **lake will be sold to a private investor** who will turn it into a café and camping spot for tourists. Chan now must think of **other means to gather food as she frequently sources** frogs and fish from the lake for her and her family.

Lao PDR is vulnerable to environmental shocks⁵ **and natural resource conflicts**, where marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by poverty, environmental degradation, and urban development.

The country's New Economic Mechanism shifts the country's **growth pursuit** to focus on **capital-intensive sectors** such as hydropower, mining, and the creation of special economic zones that prioritize **large-scale infrastructure and extractive industry projects**. While these boost Lao PDR's regional connectivity and overall GDP, they have also caused the displacement of people in marginalized and rural communities, a loss of livelihoods, a devastating impact on the environment, in addition to generating new insecurities for women, especially in the border regions of special economic zones.

The **postconflict legacy of unexploded ordnance**⁶ remains a persistent **threat in rural areas**, creating unique community livelihood challenges in Lao PDR.

5 Interactive Country Fiches, Climate Change (Interactive Country Fiches, 2025), <<https://dicf.unepgrid.ch/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/climate-change>>

6 Guo, S. 2020. The legacy effect of unexploded bombs on educational attainment in Lao PDR. ScienceDirect. <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304387820301024>>



AMPLIFY's Approach

AMPLIFY Lao PDR is positioned to respond to the intersecting issues and problems of environmental degradation, extreme weather events, labor migration, UXO contamination, natural resource conflicts, and urban development. **AMPLIFY Lao PDR** is advancing a localized Women, Peace and Security agenda by focusing on **provinces with heightened vulnerabilities (Bokeo and Savannakhet)**. Through **evidence-based, community-centered interventions**, AMPLIFY seeks to promote **women's leadership** at the local level to ensure women's and marginalized groups' participation in addressing the root causes of WPS+ issues. These include environmental adaptation planning and postconflict resilience. AMPLIFY aims to provide responsive spaces for civil society organizations, the Lao Women's Union, and indigenous women's groups to **build leadership and advocacy capacity**, strengthen coordination **through CSO platforms**, and influence relevant policies at the national level by providing support to the government in revising Lao PDR's 10th National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2026-2030.

As part of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS localization strategy, AMPLIFY Lao PDR will assist government and civil society actors in participating in relevant regional and national knowledge-sharing and learning platforms and contributing to regional and ASEAN-level WPS discourse. These efforts are guided by AMPLIFY's theory of change and monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning framework. They will be implemented through **WPS localization interventions** and tailored **partnership models that reinforce the ASEAN–New Zealand WPS collaboration**.

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