

COUNTRY CASE STUDY Lao People's Democratic Republic



Valuing and Investing in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work

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CASE STUDY **Lao People's Democratic Republic**

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Acknowledgements

This Lao PDR case study, *Valuing Unpaid Care and Domestic Work*, was prepared as part of a project in order to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and contribute to SDG target 5.4 (“recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate”). The expected outcome of the project is for governments in seven countries, one of them being Lao PDR, to gain new capacities for the design and implementation of care policies that recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. In Lao PDR specifically, it is hoped that this report will contribute to helping the government to build the country’s care system and bridging the economic gap between men and women.

The report was developed through collaboration between the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the United Kingdom, under the overall direction and guidance of Srinivas Tata, Director of the Social Development Division with ESCAP.

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Daniel Feary designed the cover and layout.

Explanatory notes

The analyses in the *Valuing and Investing in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work: Lao PDR* report are based on data and information available up to the end of January 2025. Groupings of countries and territories or areas referred to are defined as follows.

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References to dollars (\$) are to United States dollars, unless otherwise stated.

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BPfA	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
ECE	Early childhood education
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GRID	Gender Resource Information and Development Center
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LFTU	Lao Federation of Trade Unions
LSB	Lao Statistic Bureau
LSSF	Lao Social Security Fund
LSSO	Lao Social Security Organization
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MEM	Ministry of Energy and Mines
MOES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MOH	Ministry of Health
MoLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MPWT	Ministry of Public Works and Transport
NPAGE	National Plan of Action on Gender Equality
NAPPEVAWC	National Plan of Action on Preventing and Elimination of Violence against Women and Violence against Children
NCAW	National Commission for the Advancement of women
NCAWMC	National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children
NCMC	National Commission for Mothers and Children
NHI	National Health Insurance
NSAW	National Statistics and Analysis of Women
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NSPS	National Social Protection Strategy
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SHI	Social Health Insurance
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VSS	Voluntary Social Security
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

Section 1

Introduction

The care economy encompasses both paid and unpaid care work, including childcare, eldercare, healthcare and domestic work, which are essential for maintaining social and economic systems. Globally, women carry out a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, spending three times as many hours as men (UN Women, 2023), a trend that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic (ESCAP, 2021a). Recognizing its significance, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality), especially target 5.4 emphasizes the need to value unpaid care work through public services, infrastructure and social protection. In the Asia-Pacific region, demographic shifts and socioeconomic inequalities heighten care-related challenges, making care-sensitive policies necessary for sustainable development. Frameworks such as the ESCAP's Model Framework for Policy Action on the Care Economy provide a road map for addressing these issues, aiming to redistribute care responsibilities, transform gender norms and highlight the economic benefits of investing in care-related infrastructure and services (ESCAP, 2024a).

The care economy in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) presents a vital yet often underappreciated sector that significantly influences the socioeconomic fabric of the country. As Lao PDR continues its transition from a Least Developed Country to middle-income status, the role of the care economy becomes increasingly important, not just for immediate economic benefits but for long-term sustainable development and gender equality.

The government of Lao PDR has emphasized the importance of women's labour force participation as a critical aspect of its socioeconomic development. Key documents such as the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) for 2021–2025, the National Strategy Plan for Gender Equality (2016–2025) and the National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2020–2025) outline the country's road map towards gender

equality. These documents collectively emphasize the importance of enhancing women's access to education and other essential public services, increasing women's employment and improving gender statistics to effectively monitor and assess progress. Additionally, the Lao Women's Union Development Plan (2016–2020) supports these goals by focusing on promoting women's small-scale businesses as a pathway to poverty reduction and safeguarding the rights of women and children. These strategic plans are pivotal in guiding the country towards empowering women and girls in all areas of life, aligning with SDG 5.

However, a significant gap remains in addressing unpaid care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women in Lao PDR. Women are disproportionately engaged in unpaid labour, such as collecting water and firewood and caring for children, older persons and persons with disabilities – tasks that consume a considerable amount of time and energy that could otherwise be used for paid work, education, leisure or other activities (ADB, 2020). Although recent infrastructural developments have reduced the time women spend on unpaid care work, a significant gender disparity in unpaid care and domestic work still exists.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this gap. The implementation of strict measures such as lockdowns and school closures increased the amount of unpaid care work undertaken by women (ESCAP, 2021a). With schools closed, many women had to take on additional caregiving responsibilities, further limiting their ability to engage in paid employment. The impact of the pandemic on women as caregivers is a stark reminder of the essential yet often undervalued role that unpaid care work plays in society. It also highlights the urgent need for comprehensive policies that address the unequal distribution of care responsibilities within households and communities. Without such interventions, women will continue

to shoulder the majority of unpaid care work, perpetuating inequalities in both the labour market and broader social structures, and inhibiting growth.

Valuing and investing in care is essential for achieving SDGs, specifically for the achievement of SDG 5.4. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that care issues intersect with multiple SDGs, including no poverty (SDG 1), good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), access to education for girls (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). Addressing the gendered and unequal organization of care work is crucial for enhancing women's economic empowerment.

This report illustrates the complex issues surrounding women's unpaid care and domestic work in Lao PDR, analysing the institutional arrangements and policy barriers that influence the care agenda. It begins with a macro socioeconomic and political overview, setting the context for understanding the care economy in

the country. This is followed by legislative frameworks and both formal and informal mechanisms that shape gender equality, as well as social norms that affect the gendered division of work. The report further addresses women's unpaid care work across various policy categories and concludes key challenges to furthering gender equality and recommendations for action planning and policy programming.

Data for this report were compiled from various secondary sources published by the Government of Lao PDR, Lao Women's Union (LWU), Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB), United Nations agencies, including United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank. Additionally, regional and other international organizations, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Oxfam, also provided valuable data.

Section 2

Macro socioeconomic-political context

Since the introduction of economic reforms in the mid-1980s, Lao PDR has achieved notable socioeconomic progress, moving towards industrialization and modernization while fostering regional integration. The country experienced substantial growth in its economy, largely driven by investments in capital-intensive sectors such as mining and hydropower, which not only enhanced infrastructure but also facilitated a dynamic export economy. Poverty in Lao PDR has declined over the past few decades, from 46 per cent in 1998 to 18 per cent in 2019, mirroring rapid GDP growth at an annual average rate of 7.3 per cent during the same period and improving living standards across the country (LSB and the World Bank, 2020). This economic upturn has reshaped societal structures, facilitated urbanization and improved gender relations within families and communities, promoting a more inclusive society (United Nations, 2022). Recognizing these advancements, the UN declared Lao PDR eligible for graduation from Least Developed Country status in 2018, a testament to its improvements in human development and economic growth (United Nations, n.d.). Graduation is expected in 2026 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Lao PDR, 2023). Despite these developments, Lao PDR continues to face significant challenges. Structural vulnerabilities, exacerbated by soaring public debt and weak public revenues, have led to a fragile economic environment. The national currency, the kip, experienced a substantial depreciation of 23 per cent against the US dollar from January 2023 to February 2024 (World Bank, 2024a). This caused a spike in inflation to 25 per cent by February 2024, placing considerable strain on the cost of living, particularly affecting poorer populations and halting progress in poverty reduction (World Bank, 2024a). Although average household income improved, more than 40 per cent of households still saw their income lag behind inflation (World Bank, 2024b). This economic fragility is compounded by the country's heavy reliance

on external debt for funding large-scale infrastructure projects, which, while crucial for development, often do not generate adequate job opportunities or address the environmental costs they incur (World Bank, 2024a). To seek higher wages and better employment, many Laotians have migrated domestically and internationally. In February 2024, the number of registered Lao workers in Thailand, where the minimum wage was approximately three times higher than in Lao PDR, stood at 252,000, up from 215,000 in June 2023, while the total number, including unregistered migrants, is estimated to range between 300,000 and 400,000 (IOM, 2021; World Bank, 2024b).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated Lao PDR's vulnerabilities, especially affecting key sectors such as tourism and foreign investment, which caused an unprecedented employment shock. A sharp drop in tourism demand led to job losses in sectors such as retail trade, transport and hospitality, together accounting for 11 per cent of total employment (World Bank, 2020). The pandemic also reduced remittances due to job losses among migrants, creating a huge challenge for those who rely on them to survive (World Bank, 2020).

Although gradual improvements were noted with GDP growth rates of 2.3 per cent in 2021, 2.5 per cent in 2022 and 3.7 per cent in 2023 (ADB, 2023), with positive contributions from the service sectors, its economic growth still remains below pre-COVID-19 levels (World Bank, 2024b).

A key challenge for the government is to successfully manage development and poverty reduction in a manner that is inclusive, pro-poor and gender-responsive. The 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDPP) (2016–2025) and the National Vision lay strategic frameworks for achieving this to propel the country towards upper-middle-income status and align with SDGs by 2030 (World Bank, 2023).

Section 3

Institutional context for gender equality

Lao PDR has made some progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women, demonstrated through the development of legal frameworks for advancing women's rights, improved health care services and better educational attainments for women (LWU, 2019). However, recent data indicate a significant decline in overall gender equality. The 2024 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum ranked Lao PDR 89th overall out of 146 countries, falling from 36th in 2021, 53rd in 2022 and 54th in 2023. Within ASEAN, Lao PDR now trails behind the Philippines (29th) and Viet Nam (72nd). Economic participation and opportunity, once a strength, dropped from 1st place in 2021 and 2022 to 61st in 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024). Additionally, Lao PDR ranks low in political empowerment (105th) and educational attainment (104th), reflecting persistent challenges such as low representation of women in Parliament and at subnational levels, limited access to quality education for girls, and high dropout rates (World Economic Forum, 2024: 231).

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) for 2023/2024, part of the broader UNDP Human Development Index, ranking Lao PDR 139th out of 166 countries, highlights similar disparities across dimensions (UNDP, 2024).¹ In terms of education, only 18.7 per cent of women aged 25 and older have at least some secondary education, compared to 30.4 per cent of men. Additionally, the labour force participation rate is 61.5 per cent for women compared to 70.8 per cent for men. Women hold only 22 per cent of parliamentary seats as of 2024.

Despite gender disparities in labour force participation, women's labour force participation in Lao PDR is relatively robust and above the global average of

49 per cent. However, the quality and nature of this employment reveals persistent challenges. A large portion of women's employment is informal and unprotected, with over 55 per cent of contributing family members and only 44 per cent of own-account workers being female. (ILO, 2024: 13). This suggests that women have less autonomy and control in the way they earned a living. The sectors with the highest proportions of women workers include accommodation and food (62 per cent), manufacturing (59 per cent) and wholesale and retail trade (58 per cent). The gender pay gap is also prominent, with women earning a quarter less than men in similar occupations (LSB, 2023). Additionally, while women are increasingly running their own businesses, female entrepreneurs are less likely to have a bank account or credit line (UN Lao PDR, 2017).

While Lao PDR has made considerable strides in increasing girls' primary enrollment rates and improving adult literacy for women (ADB and World Bank, 2012), gender gaps remain large in higher education and among the poorest segments of society (ADB, 2024). These disparities are reflected in the proportion of young persons (aged 15–24) not in employment, education or training (youth NEET). NEET status among youth typically indicates challenges in the school-to-work transition, leading to unrealized economic potential and heightened risk of social exclusion. In 2022, young people not in employment, education or training were estimated at 24.6 per cent for females and 20.4 per cent for males (World Bank, n.d.).

The health sector has seen improvements in maternal healthcare, with increased coverage of antenatal care and more births attended by skilled medical staff.

¹ The differences between the Global Gender Gap Index and the GII rankings stem from their methodologies. The Global Gender Gap Index measures gender gaps in economic opportunities, education, health and political leadership, focusing on the relative parity between men and women (World Economic Forum, 2024). On the other hand, the GII examines losses in human development caused by gender inequalities across dimensions such as reproductive health, empowerment (such as parliamentary representation and educational attainment) and labour market participation (UNDP, 2024).

Between 2000 and 2020, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) declined from 579 to 126 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, corresponding to an average annual rate of reduction of 7.7 per cent (WHO, 2023a: 84). This placed the country among the top 10 globally for the largest reductions during this period (WHO, 2023a: 39). Despite this achievement, the country remains far from the SDG target for reducing the MMR to fewer than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030, which highlights the need for continued investment in maternal and newborn health services. .

While women's political representation in Lao PDR's National Assembly has shown overall growth, recent years have seen some decline. Since 1990, the political representation of women in the National Assembly has grown by nearly 20 per cent (LUX DEV, 2021). In 2018, women held 27.5 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019), and the target of women occupying 15 per cent of management positions in state and mass organizations was met (Sriprasert and Nguyen, 2020). However, by the 2021 election, this figure had declined to 22 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.), falling below the global average of 25.8 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023).

Women's representation is also still low at the provincial or district levels. At the provincial level, there are no women governors and only three women vice-governors (LWU, 2018). At the village level, only 1.7 per cent of village chiefs and 7.2 per cent of deputy village chiefs are female (LWU, 2018).

Despite the challenges, the government has actively advocated for women's rights through institutional frameworks, social norms and targeted policies that shape the landscape of gender equality. The following section outlines the progress and challenges in these areas, examining how formal and informal institutional contexts influence the empowerment of women in Lao PDR.

3.1 Legislative frameworks

Lao PDR provides a foundational framework for advocating for gender equality through its 1991 Constitution (revised in 2015), which supports equal participation of women and men in economic, social and political life (Box 1). It has been further strengthened by adherence to various national laws and policies and international agreements and legal instruments such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Lao PDR government established a National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) in 2003, which is a key institutional mechanism for advancing gender mainstreaming in development programmes and policies. This body enhanced the collection of sex-disaggregated statistics and developed a national gender strategy. Following in 2004, the government adopted Law No. 08 on the Development and Protection of Women, which aimed to promote women's knowledge and capacity,

BOX 1 Key constitutional provisions for gender equality

ARTICLE 22 (AMENDED)

The State and society attends to developing high quality national education, to create opportunities and [favorable] conditions in education for all people throughout the country, especially people in remote areas, ethnic groups, women, children, disadvantaged people and disabled people.

ARTICLE 25 (AMENDED)

The State and society focus on building, improving disease prevention systems, providing health care to all people with quality, creating conditions to ensure that all people have access to health care, especially women and children, poor people and people in remote areas, to ensure the people's good health.

ARTICLE 29

The State, society and families attend to implementing development policies and supporting the progress of women and to protecting the legitimate and benefits of women and children.

ARTICLE 35

Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, beliefs and ethnic group.

ARTICLE 37

Citizens of both genders enjoy equal rights in the political, economic, cultural and social fields and in family affairs.

Source: Lao PDR Constitution 1991 (rev. 2015).

eradicate trafficking, combat violence against women and children, and enhance women's participation in development. In the meantime, Lao PDR participated in regional collaborations through ASEAN mechanisms including the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Women and Children (2004), the ASEAN Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons Particularly Women and Children (2004), and later, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (2010).

Over the last decade, Lao PDR has made progress in developing legal frameworks that provide an overarching architecture for the effective implementation of women's rights. The government introduced the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women and Law of Lao Women's Union in 2013. The year 2014 saw significant advancements with the adoption of Law No. 56 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Children, which defined various forms of violence, listed prevention measures and detailed the responsibilities of government institutions in protecting and supporting survivors.

The country has integrated national policies for gender equality through National Plan of Action on Preventing and Elimination of Violence against Women and Violence against Children (NAPPEVAWC). In 2014, the government endorsed and promulgated the first NAPPEVAWC (2014–2020) with the aim of implementing policies, the constitution and various laws, as well as the country's obligations under international conventions related to the protection of women and children from all forms of violence in all settings.

The enactment of Law No. 77 on Gender Equality in 2019 made another leap forward. It provides a detailed national definition of gender equality and aims to enhance equality across multiple societal dimensions including political participation, economic opportunities and healthcare among others.

In 2021, the government successfully integrated the Second NAPPEVAWC (2021–2026) and the Fourth National Plan of Action on Gender Equality (2021–2025) (NPAGE) into the strategic plans of all 18 provinces and 25 line/sector ministries, as well as ministry equivalent organizations, 8 party organizations and 2 judiciary bodies (NCAWMC, 2024), aligned with the time frame of the 9th NSEDP (2021–2025) (Box 2). The NAPPEVAWC emphasizes the three main areas to address violence against women and children: prevention, response and coordination, while the NPAGE prioritizes women's health and reproductive health, political participation, economic empowerment, education, employment and social protection.

Acknowledging the importance of addressing unpaid care and domestic work in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, the Lao PDR government adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening the Care Economy and Fostering Resilience Towards the Post-2025 ASEAN Community in October 2024 (ASEAN, 2024). Additionally, the government is committed to upholding prior ASEAN commitments, including the ASEAN Guidelines on Gender Mainstreaming into Labour and Employment Policies Towards Decent Work and All (2020), ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy (2021) and the ASEAN Declaration on Gender Equality and Family Development (2023). By endorsing this declaration, the country commits to policies that recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work while improving care infrastructure, employment conditions and social protection systems.

3.2 Women's machineries

In Lao PDR, three key national mechanisms promote gender equality and women's empowerment: the Lao Women's Union (LWU), the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers, and Children (NCAWMC) and the National Assembly Women's Caucus (NCAWMC, 2024). Each plays a distinct yet complementary role in advancing gender-related policies and ensuring women's representation in governance.

LWU, established in 1955, serves as the primary institution advocating for gender equality and women's rights in Lao PDR, representing women from all ethnic groups. In 1991, the LWU was formally recognized under the Constitution as having responsibility for responding to women's development needs, promoting the status and role of women and promoting unity among women of different ethnic groups and social strata throughout the country. As a mass-based organization that operates throughout the country, the LWU has taken the lead in disseminating and advising on the implementation of the Constitution, laws and regulations of the government, and the international instruments about women's rights (LWU, 2009).

LWU operates under three quality targets, which include "being a good citizen, being good in development and having a good cultural family" (LWU, 2019: 36). These targets align with the broader national agenda of integrating gender considerations into development policies and practices. LWU's structure extends deeply into the community, with representation in every village council, ensuring that women's interests are voiced at all administrative levels (US Department of State, 2011). Although there is a challenge in adequately representing women from remote or minority ethnic communities,

BOX 2 Gender equality targets for 2025 in the 9th NSEDP (2021–2025)

- 1** At least 30 per cent of female representation in the National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies
- 2** At least 30 per cent of female representation in the leadership positions at the national level
- 3** At least 20 per cent of female representation in leadership positions at the provincial and Vientiane Capital level
- 4** At least 20 per cent of female representation in the leadership positions at the district level
- 5** At least 10 per cent of female representation in the leadership positions at the village level
- 6** At least 50 per cent of female representation in civil services
- 7** Gender Inequality Index to reduce to 0.430
- 8** Gender Equality Index to increase to 0.984
- 9** Gender Development Index to increase to 0.675
- 10** Percentage of women abused by their intimate partner reduced to 4 per cent
- 11** Percentage of women victims of violence having access to legal, health and social services to increase to 10 per cent
- 12** Percentage of women who have experienced domestic violence in their lifetime to reduce to 12 per cent
- 13** At least 80 per cent of women above 15 years old well informed of the national Laws and Policies related to the rights and interests of women and children
- 14** At least 50 per cent of women from all ethnicities informed of counselling services for women and children, those in need of help and female and child victims enjoy protection and victim support in accordance with the relevant laws, and better access to justice
- 15** Early marriage is prevented and reduced
- 16** 1,500 poor and disadvantaged women in the Provincial Women's Unions receive short-term and long-term vocational training
- 17** Expand the Lao Women's Unions to the private sector (Women's Business Units with women accounting for 50 per cent or more) to reach 20 per cent

Source: UNDP, 2022a, p. 11.

highlighting areas where further outreach and support are needed, this extensive network allows the LWU to serve as a bridge between the government, the People's Revolutionary Party and women across urban and rural areas, often being the sole representative voice for women in public administration discussions (ADB and World Bank, 2012). The LWU also promotes and monitors the implementation of women's development programmes that aim to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men, in line with the Party's policies, the Lao Constitution and various laws.

Key initiatives of the LWU include income generation, credit and saving schemes, education, nutrition and reproductive health – all predominantly supported by donor agencies (ADB and World Bank, 2012). Moreover, the LWU collaborates extensively with government bodies and international NGOs to further its mission. A significant milestone was the approval by the Lao Congress of the 2011–2015 road map, which was specifically designed to bolster the rights and

welfare of Lao women and children. This strategic plan emphasizes the government's commitment to advancing gender equality through structured and targeted initiatives.

In 1997, the LWU established the Gender Resource Information and Development Center (GRID), which has become its technical body. GRID focuses on building capacity among gender specialists through training programmes at the central and provincial levels. It also engages in the development of training materials, conducts research and performs gender analysis on various topics, which it disseminates widely, reaching an extensive audience via GRID's five libraries and resource centres across the country.

In cooperation with the Lao Women's Union, the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers, and Children (NCAWMC) serves as the other focal point of SDG 5. Its former form, the National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW)

was established in 2003 to coordinate national efforts for implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other gender-related commitments. While the LWU engages directly with women at the grassroots level, representing their interests and facilitating development initiatives, the NCAW functions at the policy level to guide and monitor the integration of gender perspectives across government frameworks. Together, these two entities seem to form a synergy as LWU channels the voices and needs of women from communities, while the NCAW translates these insights into strategic policies and frameworks that drive systemic change.

In 2017, the NCAW was restructured by combining NCAW and National Commission for Mother and Child (NCMC) to form a single entity, NCAWMC. It serves as the focal point for monitoring and implementing policies on gender equality and child rights, as well as fulfilling international commitments such as CEDAW, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its operational protocol (NCAWMC, 2024). To effectively implement its mandate, NCAWMC collaborates with various stakeholders, including the government, businesses, development partners, international organizations, civil society and NGOs.

Since 2020, the NCAWMC, in collaboration with the LWU, has strengthened efforts to promote and monitor the implementation of the laws and policies (NCAWMC, 2024). A key initiative is developing a data system and online platform to collect disaggregated data on gender, ethnicity and age, essential for monitoring CEDAW, CRC and other treaty commitments (NCAWMC, 2024: 56).

Another institution that is key to advancing gender equality is the National Assembly Women's Caucus, established in 2010 as a legislative mechanism in the National Assembly (LWU, 2019: 26). The Women's Caucus, consisting of all female members of the National Assembly, played a leading role in integrating gender perspectives into legislation, monitoring the implementation of the Constitution, laws and policies on gender equality, women's empowerment

and protection of women and children (LWU, 2019: 36). Among their key initiatives are the development of a resolution on gender issues for the Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum in 2009, leadership training for female members, gender training workshops for parliamentarians and gender screening of budgets and laws (ADB and World Bank, 2012: 54–55).

Despite the various institutional commitments to advancing gender equality, there remains a gap in the initiatives regarding the recognition and valuation of unpaid care work. The oversight highlights a need for increased institutional focus to fully address the breadth of gender equality issues, including the economic and social contributions of unpaid care work.

3.3 Social and cultural norms

In Lao PDR, cultural norms associated with a patriarchal society continue to shape the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, with household and caregiving responsibilities primarily falling on women. Initiatives like the Gender Action Learning Systems, implemented in 34 rural villages under the EU-funded SOLAR project have raised awareness of gender issues within their families, leading to increased family conversations, joint participation of men and women in social events and women taking on more active roles in outdoor agricultural work (ILO, 2024). However, traditional expectations remain largely unchanged. Men's limited participation in unpaid care work is reinforced by social norms that define them as economic providers, naturalizing domestic duties – from childcare to managing household chores – as women's work. The recent Household Care Survey found that men spend more time on paid work, while women dedicate more time to unpaid domestic labour, a pattern that persists across the life cycle and begins in childhood – girls engage more in childcare, while boys spend more time on paid work and leisure activities (Oxfam, 2024). Additionally, awareness of gender equality and women's rights remains low, especially among those residing in remote and mountainous areas (LWU, 2019), making progress towards equitable care responsibilities even more challenging.

Section 4

Addressing unpaid care work

Unpaid care and domestic work are pivotal yet often invisible components of the socioeconomic fabric, disproportionately shouldered by women due to deep-rooted gender norms. Women in Lao PDR are overwhelmingly the primary caregivers and managers of household duties. According to the 2024 Household Care Survey, women in Lao PDR spend longer hours on unpaid care and domestic work than men, devoting 3 hours and 40 minutes per day to unpaid care work compared to 1 hour and 55 minutes spent by men (Oxfam, 2024). Similarly, a 2018 ADB survey found that women spend five times as much time on unpaid care work as men do (ADB, 2020). Almost 30 per cent of women identify care work as the primary barrier to joining the labour force (NCWAMC, 2024: 26).

Moreover, due to the country's primary rural-based population, access to cooking with fuel, piped water, sanitation facilities and transport makes daily unpaid care work more difficult. This adversely affects women's time for either paid work or leisure as they are usually the ones to fetch water and collect fuelwood for the household, a time-consuming activity that leaves women depleted because of the drudgery of these tasks. This process of depletion and how women have no time to rest, has been well documented for other countries by Chopra and Zambelli (2017) and applies equally to the Lao PDR context. Climate change further exacerbates these challenges, as extreme weather events such as flooding and droughts disrupt water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems, forcing women to spend even more time securing essential resources for their households. In Lao PDR, over 50 per cent of districts are highly vulnerable to climate change, with women in rural areas disproportionately affected due to their role in managing household water and fuel needs (WHO, 2023b).

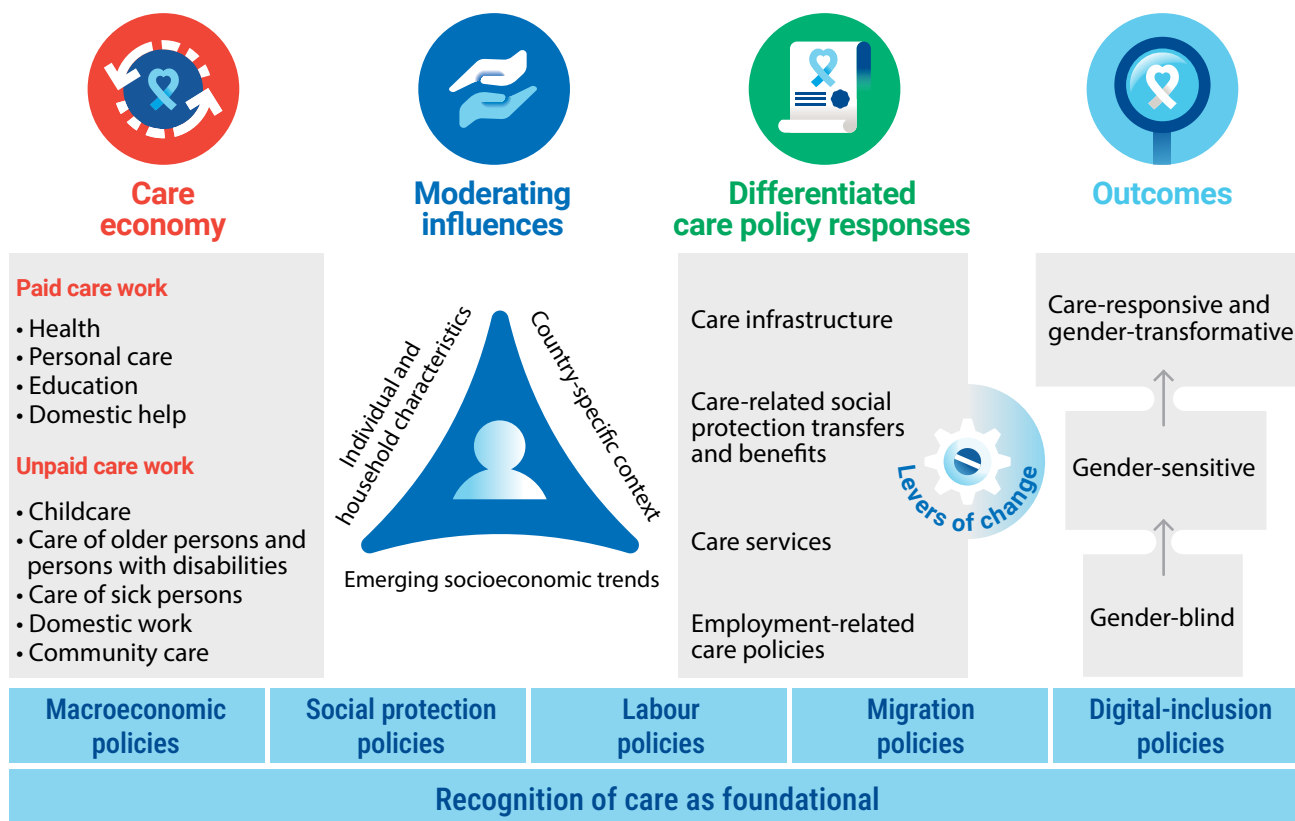
The impact of unpaid care work is particularly acute among young women aged 15–24, who are often forced to choose between caregiving responsibilities and

education or employment. As a result, a significant number of these young women are classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), which marks a critical loss of potential within the workforce and hinders long-term socioeconomic development of the country (UNDP, 2022c).

The increased demand for unpaid care and domestic work has been notable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women's roles centred around staying at home, keeping the house clean, ensuring sanitary meal preparation and caring for children and older persons whereas men took responsibility for participating in community meetings to receive information about COVID-19, advising family members on prevention and being responsible for essential tips (Nguyen et al., 2020). Due to the increased household duties for women during the COVID-19 pandemic, their ability to generate income and attend school was limited.

Despite some progress in legal and policy frameworks to enhance gender equality, Lao PDR still faces substantial challenges in fully recognizing and addressing unpaid care work as key barrier to women's empowerment, especially in rural areas (UNDP, 2022b). Effective policies that could alleviate the disproportionate responsibilities of unpaid care work include investments in infrastructure to reduce the time spent on daily chores, initiatives to promote labour-saving technology and robust mechanisms to support and implement equitable labour practices.

Recognizing SDG 5.4, this report draws on the care-sensitive policy framework (see Figure 1) developed by ESCAP in its previous regional and sub-regional work on the care economy (ESCAP, 2021b). While the care economy consists of both paid and unpaid care work, this report focuses on unpaid care and

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework for care-sensitive and gender-differentiated policies

Source: ESCAP, 2021b, p. 8.

domestic work, which includes the care of children, older or sick persons and persons with disabilities, household and domestic chores as well as voluntary community services. The time, extent, quality and outcomes of unpaid care and domestic work are shaped by household characteristics, national contexts and socioeconomic trends. Women's experiences in caregiving are further influenced by multiple axes such as geographical location, income level, ethnicity, age, marital status, disability, employment type, which can exacerbate their marginalization in policy responses.

The framework emphasizes the importance of an enabling policy environment, spanning macroeconomic policies, social protection, labour markets, migration and digital inclusion, to support gender-transformative care systems. It identifies four policy categories of care (Box 3) as well as seven levers of change (see Section 6) that must be addressed to recognize and value women's disproportionate load of unpaid care and domestic work. This section describes the efforts and success Lao PDR has had in prioritizing and addressing women's gender-differentiated care needs.

BOX 3 Care policy categories to address unpaid care and domestic work

Care infrastructure – water, sanitation, energy, transport, food services, health care infrastructure for persons who are sick (HIV patients, COVID-19 patients) or living with a disability and pregnant women.

Care-related social protections – cash transfers, cash for care, vouchers, tax benefits, non-contributory pension schemes.

Care services – childcare, older person care and care provisions for persons with disability or illness through the State or the market.

Employment-related care policies – sick leave, family-friendly working arrangements, flexitime, career breaks, sabbaticals, severance pay, employer-funded or contributory social protection schemes like maternity and parental leave benefits.

Source: ESCAP, 2021b, p. 15.



4.1 Care infrastructure

Recent infrastructure developments have alleviated the challenges faced by women engaged in unpaid care and domestic work. This progress includes improvements in transportation, water supply, electricity accessibility and educational facilities (ADB, 2020). Central to these developments has been the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation (MPWT), which oversees strategy and policy for building infrastructure that supports care work, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH) (ESCAP, 2024b). The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) and the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) play key roles in developing educational environments and electrification projects in rural areas (ESCAP, 2024b).

Significant progress has been made in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector, highlighted in the 2019 National Policy on Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene that provides principles, guidelines and role of relevant actors (Box 4). Further, the 9th NSEDP targets an increase in safe water utilization rate to reach 95 per cent and household level toilet utilization rate to reach 85 per cent by 2025 (Lao PDR, 2021).

The proportion of households accessing a basic water supply has increased from 70 per cent in 2012 to 83.9 per cent in 2017 (UNICEF Lao PDR, 2019). However, challenges in WASH access persist related to urban-rural areas, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. For example, urban areas exhibit a higher availability of handwashing facilities (73.3 per cent), compared to rural areas (45.6 per cent) (LSB, 2018: 317). Similarly, disparity is observed between Lao Tai communities (66.4 per cent) and minority ethnic communities (32.6 – 57.5 per cent), as well as between richer households (86.6 per cent) and poorer households (20.9 per cent) (LSB, 2018: 318).

Research has shown that women and girls take on significantly larger role in WASH activities for household (UNICEF and WHO, 2023). The initiative to follow handwashing guidelines during the COVID-19 has inadvertently increased the workload for rural women and girls who are primarily responsible for water collection and household sanitation and hygiene. This involves the need to carry more water to the home from water sources and increased time spent collecting water. Further, the journeys to collect water may expose women and girls to risks of different forms of violence travelling to or from water collection points (Sriprasert and Nguyen, 2020).

Despite the central role in daily WASH management, women are largely excluded from decision-making processes related to WASH policy development and management. This exclusion leads to systems that often do not meet women's specific needs, such as those related to menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and safety (Sriprasert and Nguyen, 2020). Recognizing the need for inclusive policy development, it is essential that future strategies involve direct input from women to ensure that infrastructure adequately meets their needs and reduces the unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work.

In addition to WASH, clean cooking infrastructure is also a critical concern. The SDG 7 Road Map for Lao PDR, released in 2022, notes that while universal electricity access may be achieved by 2025, clean cooking access remains one of the lowest in the Asia-Pacific region. Without additional efforts, only 20 per cent of the population will have access to clean cooking by 2030, leaving over 1 million households reliant on unclean fuels (ESCAP, 2022). This lack of clean cooking infrastructure, though often overlooked, has significant health implications and disproportionately impacts women and girls, who are primarily responsible for cooking.

Urban-rural infrastructure gaps also affect access to early childhood education (ECE), particularly in remote areas where poor road access and lack of transport prevent children from attending school. Insufficient funding for ECE facilities and teacher shortages in rural areas further restrict enrolment. ECE attendance rate remains low in some southern provinces, with rates below 20 per cent, compared to 63.8 per cent in Vientiane (LSB, 2018). These barriers not only hinder early learning opportunities but also increase childcare responsibilities for families, particularly women, due to the lack of accessible formal education options.



4.2 Care-related social protection

Lao PDR introduced the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme in 2016 to expand healthcare coverage to entire population by integrating other existing health schemes. However, gaps remain in healthcare access, as many informal workers and older persons still face high out-of-pocket costs, challenges in enrolling on social protection schemes and barriers to accessing specialized care (Bodhisane and Pongpanich, 2023).

BOX 4 The 16 principles of the 2019 National Policy on Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene

- 1 Promote and protect the right of all people living in Lao PDR to access safe and sufficient water services, both for use and consumption equally at affordable and fair tariffs, and to safe sanitation and hygiene facilities, meeting defined standards.
- 2 Protect water resources from all kinds of contamination which have negative impacts on water resources.
- 3 Support decentralization for local planning using bottom up approach. Increase implementation at local levels to achieve tangible results as per "3 Builds".
- 4 Identify priority targets, focusing on locations and sectors as follows:
 - A **Rural settings:** those who live on mountains, rural remote areas, poor and ethnic groups, and those affected by development projects and natural disasters;
 - B **Urban settings:** those who live in suburbs (countryside) and earn minimum wages and those who resettle from mountainous areas to the lowlands, including poor communities in densely populated areas;
 - C **Health:** ensure health care facilities have safe and sufficient water supply and sanitation facilities, and have appropriate measures for garbage and wastewater management; and
 - D **Education and sports:** ensure all educational institutions have sufficient water and sanitation facilities. Special attention is paid to early childhood education and primary schools in rural areas.
- 5 Build capacity for development and overall management of water supply, sanitation and hygiene services through scheduling regular training at all levels and institutions, including for the private sector, with particular focus on increasing women's involvement in the water supply, sanitation and hygiene sectors.
- 6 Ensure water for both use and consumption is fully managed, mobilized and sustainable with community ownership and engagement of civil societies.
- 7 Raise awareness on hygiene and sanitation with focus on behaviour change. Coordinate with relevant sectors and local authorities to increase community ownership and engagement of civil societies in these areas.
- 8 Implement water safety plans and focus on water quality surveillance to ensure MoH water standards are met, including establishment of water-quality laboratories.
- 9 Regulate and collect tariffs of drinking water and water supply to ensure consumers receive fair tariffs and reasonable prices. This includes wastewater service charges.
- 10 Establish effective and sustained mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation by involving relevant sectors in the monitoring of WASH sector implementation.
- 11 Promote the use of water for production if water is sufficient in terms of quality and quantity.
- 12 Manage the disposal of faecal sludge from septic tanks and safe disposal of related waste products.
- 13 Manage and control all pollutants which affect rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, groundwater, and other sources.
- 14 Promote use of renewable energy and reuse of resources as much as possible.
- 15 Enhance water security and climate change resilience with the aim to sustainably protect water resources; prevent environmental accumulations, droughts; promote clean environments; prevent pollutants and adverse effect to humans, flora and fauna, and water resources. Ensure sufficient water is provided both in quality and quantity.
- 16 Provide sufficient budgets to implement policies, strategies and the five-year programme of each related sector, with contribution and the engagement of Government, international partners, private sector, and communities.

Source: Lao PDR Country Overview, Asia and the Pacific, Finance Minister's Meeting 2020 (https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020_Country%20Overview_Lao%20PDR.pdf).

The majority of the working-age population in Lao PDR is engaged in the informal economy. Rising inequality and the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 have exacerbated the vulnerability of these workers, emphasizing an urgent need for effective social protection. Social protection in Lao PDR is available through health insurance, social security (contributory) and social welfare systems (non-contributory), yet access for informal workers remains notably insufficient (Oxfam, 2020).

The Lao Social Security Fund (LSSF) is managed by the Lao Social Security Organization (LSSO) under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoLSW). It pools resources from various contributors, including government officers, the army, police, employers, employees and informal workers to finance social security benefits (Oxfam in Laos, 2021).

In 2014, the LSSO operated the Voluntary Social Security (VSS) scheme specifically for informal workers. The VSS provides a range of benefits, such as sick leave compensation, old-age pensions, healthcare, maternity benefits and others (Oxfam, 2020). Unlike the compulsory social security scheme, the VSS is entirely funded by its members, with monthly contributions ranging from LAK 99,000 to LAK 243,000, calculated as 9 per cent of insurable earnings (Oxfam, 2020; Oxfam in Laos, 2021). Despite these benefits, the VSS had only 8,007 participants in 2018, representing a mere 2.7 per cent of all LSSO members (LSSO, 2019).

According to a study conducted by Oxfam in Laos (2021) on informal workers' access to the LSSF, one of the significant barriers that prevent informal workers from participating in the VSS scheme is the low level of awareness among workers about the scheme and its benefits. The registration process is cumbersome, requiring individuals to personally visit Social Security Offices that are not available in all districts (Oxfam, 2020). Moreover, the services provided are perceived as low quality and the procedures for claiming benefits are complex (Oxfam in Laos, 2021). The scheme's financial demands are not aligned with the irregular income patterns of informal workers, particularly affecting those with low incomes (Oxfam, 2020). The high cost of VSS contributions deters over half of the non-member workers surveyed from enrolling, as they cite low and irregular income as their main reasons for not joining (Oxfam, 2020).

Improving access to social security for informal workers is a key objective of the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), endorsed on 1 April 2020 (see Box 5). Guided by principles of equity, adequacy,

effectiveness, universality, non-discrimination, progressivity and sustainability, it aims to gradually achieve universal access to basic social protection services, including health insurance, social security, and social welfare by 2030 (NCAWMC, 2024: 29). Despite this goal, less than 1 per cent of informal workers have access to the National Social Security Fund (Oxfam in Laos, 2021). The government, along with organizations like Oxfam, has been working to improve access to social protection for the most vulnerable groups, including informal workers, women, self-employed individuals, small-scale farmers, daily wage earners, migrant workers, home-based workers and those unemployed or underemployed in the formal economy (see Box 6).

Various strategic interventions have been implemented, such as strengthening work groups, farmers' cooperatives, and grassroots trade unions were formed. This effort has resulted in the formation of 195 informal worker groups, reaching a total of 7,283 workers, including 3,422 women. The mobile social security registration initiative has made services more accessible to villagers by periodically visiting groups of villages to provide information, register new members, and process payments, thereby contributing to long-term sustainability. Currently, the updated VSS registration number has reached 1,659 accounts, with 536 of those being accounts for women.

BOX 5 Voluntary social security in the National Social Protection Strategy

Goal 2: The social security system is further developed and strengthened.

Objective 2.2: Social security covers an increasing number of workers in the informal sector.

Activity 6: Adapt the current scheme design to the characteristics of workers in non-standard forms of employment.

- Establish adequate mechanisms to ensure that workers in the informal sector are encouraged to participate in the social security system voluntarily and that they are offered benefits appropriate to their specific needs.
- Advocate and encourage informal economy workers to voluntarily contribute to social security, like, for example, allowing them access at a lower cost.

Source: Oxfam, 2020, p. 2.

BOX 6 Oxfam's work in Luang Prabang, Champasack, Bokeo and Vientiane capital

To improve the well-being of informal workers, the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU) in partnership with Oxfam and partner civil society organizations have implemented a project for contributing to a “more inclusive and equitable social protection for formal and informal workers in Laos”. For this purpose, they organized three groups in Bokeo, nine groups in Luang Prabang, four groups in Champasack, and 10 groups in the capital city, Vientiane. These groups included workers at the ferry port, construction workers, workers in a banana and a rubber plantation, farmers growing rice, tea, and coffee, handcraft artisans, and handweavers. This project prioritized raising awareness of social protection, including social security and voluntary schemes, alongside labour rights and collective bargaining agreements. Out of the ten groups in Vientiane capital, three of them reported having members who registered as the LSSO under the VSS scheme, with no data from the other provinces at the time of finalizing this document.

Source: Oxfam, 2020, p. 4.



4.3 Care services

In Lao PDR, informal and community-based care provision play a key role in caregiving. This provision is deeply rooted in cultural values where family members, neighbours and community groups often work together to provide care for individuals in need, including children, older persons and persons with disabilities. In rural areas, where access to formal care is limited, these informal structures ensure that essential support, such as caregiving for daily tasks, emotional support and social inclusion is available.

Access to care is influenced by the country's ethnic diversity. Lao PDR is home to 49 ethnic groups, many of whom speak their own languages (Liverani et al., 2024). This creates barriers to communication between health workers and patients, particularly for older persons, women and those without formal education. This section examines the existing formal care services in the country and the socio-cultural and systemic factors affecting access to these services.

Care for children: In Lao PDR, early childhood education (ECE) includes crèches for infants aged 3 months to 2 years, kindergartens for children aged 3–5

and preprimary education specifically for 5-year-olds in rural and remote areas where traditional kindergarten may not be available (Viraphanh, 2023). The MOES holds responsibility for overseeing these services, ensuring that they are accessible to children across different regions of the country, with private providers increasingly contributing to urban areas and development partners supporting rural regions.

The government of Lao PDR has expanded ECE over recent years. In Lao PDR where ECE is not mandatory, the decision to enroll a child in preschool typically rests with the parents or guardians (Kamiya and Nomura, 2023). The participation rate of 5-year-olds in kindergarten has increased from 70.9 per cent in 2015–2016 to 82.7 per cent in 2019–2020, while the participation rate of 3-to-5-year-olds in kindergarten increased from 49.1 per cent to 61.3 per cent during the same period (MOES, 2020). Such improvements have taken place in all 18 provinces in Lao PDR, although there are significant variations between provinces, ranging from 44.7 per cent in Attpeu to 88.7 per cent in Vientiane in 2019–2020 (Viraphanh, 2023: 4).

A child's attendance in the ECE is expected to improve their readiness for entering primary school. As Article 15 of the Education Law 2008 of Lao PDR states, “Early Childhood Education should ensure that children develop holistically, know the foundation of talking, writing, reading, listening, looking at, and drawing, love their parents, teachers, those surrounding them, county, nature and clearness, have talents, love to learn, and prepare themselves for primary education”.

The structural quality of ECE has also improved. Recent reforms have focused on improving the learning environment by increasing the number of classrooms and teachers and developing comprehensive preschool curricula supported by adequate teaching and learning materials (LSB, 2018). These measures are to improve the process quality of ECE, ensuring that the programmes are not only accessible but also effective in delivering quality education (Kamiya and Nomura, 2023).

The responsibility for the regulation of the ECE sector rests with the MOES, which considers international commitments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and SDGs (Viraphanh, 2023). The ministry also aligns its policies with national laws to protect children and promote inclusive education (Kamiya and Nomura, 2023). Through its Early Childhood Education Department, established in 2016, the ministry aims to enhance young children's development in physical, cognitive, emotional, language and social learning (Viraphanh, 2023).

Care for older persons: Elderly care in Lao PDR is deeply influenced by cultural traditions that emphasize familial support and community involvement for older persons. However, the country faces substantial challenges in structuring effective support systems for this population. Recognizing the health and living conditions of older persons, the Government approved the Decree on Older Persons in 2004, which created the National Committee for Older Persons. The 2004 Decree outlined comprehensive strategies to enhance healthcare, welfare, education and information provision, income enhancement and social participation for older persons to transfer knowledge to younger generation (Bodhisane and Pongpanich, 2023). However, huge gaps in legislation, data collection and resources impede the effective implementation of these strategies.

From 2019 to 2021, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW) led a comprehensive revision of the Decree on Older Persons, ensuring greater alignment with international frameworks such as the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) as well as the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing. With support from ESCAP, the revised Decree, endorsed in July 2021 (No. 473/PM), provides an updated legal foundation for promoting the rights and welfare of older persons, while recognizing their contributions to society. It emphasizes key areas such as healthcare access, social protection, active ageing and the establishment of older people's associations. Building on this legislative progress, the MOLSW is now finalizing its 10-year National Strategy and Action Plan for Older Persons (2026–2035). This strategy seeks to integrate ageing-related goals into the broader National Socioeconomic Development Plan, demonstrating a commitment to addressing population ageing as well as the opportunities and challenges of an ageing population.

At the subnational level, there are very few initiatives promoting the welfare of older persons. Even in urban areas, facilities and programmes that foster social activities for them are limited. Additionally, there is a shortage of social workers trained to help older persons who require specialized care (Bodhisane and Pongpanich, 2023).

Healthcare for older persons is primarily provided through a government-operated system structured across three administrative levels – central, provincial and district hospitals, and health centers. The MOH oversees the organization and delivery of health services, including the management of health information, human resources, funding and sector development. It also regulates food and drug safety, administers drug and equipment policies and licenses private health

institutions. Despite these structures, specific healthcare privileges for older persons are absent.

Financial barriers further complicate access to healthcare for older persons. A significant portion of healthcare financing relies on out-of-pocket expenses, which poses financial challenges for the poor and renders them more susceptible to health shocks (Zhang and Liu, 2013). To address these issues, the government has developed several social health protection systems. Notably, in 2016, the government initiated the National Health Insurance (NHI) plan to increase coverage and financial protection for all, including older persons. However, the proportion of government health expenditure allocated to Social Health Insurance (SHI) was just 4.4 per cent in 2016 (Bodhisane and Pongpanich, 2023). The figure is expected to increase over time, potentially reducing the dependency on out-of-pocket expenses and enhancing access to healthcare services for vulnerable populations, including older persons.

One of the primary challenges to effective policy implementation is the limited availability of comprehensive data on older persons. Current statistics do not adequately capture the diverse needs and conditions of older persons, particularly in rural and ethnically diverse regions. This gap may hinder evidence-based planning and targeted interventions. Moreover, while the forthcoming National Strategy and Action Plan on Older Persons acknowledges the critical issue of care for older persons, its focus remains predominantly on family- and community-based care systems. This informal reliance on non-state actors poses challenges in addressing the increasing demand for professional and institutional care, particularly in urban areas where traditional networks are weakening.

Care for persons with disabilities: The care for persons with disabilities reveals profound systemic challenges and resource inadequacies. The 2015 Census reports approximately 160,881 individuals, or 2.8 per cent of the population, with disabilities (LSB, 2020). These individuals often encounter barriers in accessing appropriate healthcare and support services. Limited healthcare services, a lack of specialists and regional healthcare gaps contribute to the difficulties experienced by persons with disabilities (USAID, 2018). The healthcare system's failure to accommodate the various needs of individuals with disabilities is especially evident for those with psychosocial and developmental disabilities. For example, Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane Capital stands as the sole provider of comprehensive mental health services, therapies and medications, indicating a severe shortfall in nationwide healthcare provision (Charla et al., 2022).

Women with disabilities face additional challenges due to cultural norms that restrict their mobility and autonomy (Charla et al., 2022), often requiring them to rely on men to take them to treatments (USAID, 2018). Further, the lack of privacy during treatment can be a deterrent for women with disabilities due to social concerns and stigmas, leading them to avoid necessary treatment (USAID, 2018).

The government has initiated several measures as part of the NSEDP (2021–2025) to improve healthcare access and support for person with disabilities. The ratification of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2019 and the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) highlight crucial steps toward legal and social recognition of disability rights (see Box 7). Despite these efforts, practical implementation remains inconsistent, calling for ongoing reforms and targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to all necessary services.

The care services in Lao PDR show mixed progress across different sectors, with both improvements and ongoing challenges. ECE has notably expanded, improving access and quality; however, it still faces substantial regional disparities. Elderly care is minimal and primarily supported by traditional family structures, lacking government-led initiatives. Care for persons with disabilities also shows critical gaps, particularly in providing equitable access to all necessary care. Despite advancements in policy and infrastructure, effective implementation varies widely, underscoring the need for continuous efforts to address these gaps and enhance service delivery across all segments of the population.



4.4 Employment-related care policies

Labor Law No.43 (2013) and Social Security Law No. 54 (2018) include occupational safety, health protections and maternity benefits for women in formal employment sectors (Box 8). Article 98 (Labor Law, 2013) allows women to take a minimum of 105 days of maternity leave, with at least 42 days of these days taken post-birth. For twin births, the leave extends to at least 120 days. During this time, employees are entitled to their full regular salary or wages. Additionally, should complications arise from childbirth requiring extended leave, women are eligible for subsidies as specified in the Law on Social Security. For up to a year after childbirth, women can also take one hour per day for childcare activities, including taking the child for vaccination. Article 97 (Labor Law, 2013) prohibits the employment of pregnant women or those caring for children under 1 year old in specific hazardous working conditions, such as carrying heavy loads, night shifts, overtime and prolonged standing. If a woman engages in any of these types of work while being pregnant or caring for a newborn, the employer must transfer her to a safer role with the same salary or wages maintained. Although there is no specific regulation about paternity leave, Article 58 states that employees can take personal leave of not less than three days when their spouse gives birth or miscarries. (Labor Law, 2013)

Among ASEAN countries, Lao PDR's maternity leave provisions are similar but could be further strengthened. For example, Vietnam offers six months of maternity

BOX 7 Legal frameworks for the rights of persons with disabilities

The government of Lao PDR adopted the Decree on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The provisions for social welfare for persons with disabilities are outlined in its Articles 31 and 32.

In 2019, the government enacted the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Prime Ministerial Decree No. 18/1995 established a cross-ministerial body appointing the National Committee for Disabled Persons (NCDP) to act as the national focal point on disability matters and to advise the government on policy, programmes and service provision related to disability. The country has a draft Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities (2021–2025).

According to the National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021–2025), unexploded ordnance is a priority issue to be tackled as hundreds of people in Lao PDR are killed or disabled by unexploded ordnance (UXO) explosions (Hussey, 2020). The Plan proposes to support 5,760 of 9,607 UXO victims with medical, psychological and rehabilitation treatments as well as vocational and employment training; their intent is to raise awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, lessening stigma and increasing support.

Source: Open Development Laos (n.d.); Lao PDR NSEDP (2021–2025).

leave for women (see 2019 Vietnam Labour Code), allowing mothers more time for recovery and bonding with their newborns. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, highlighting the importance of adequate maternity leave to support this practice. It is also required that caregiving responsibilities be shared by both parents through increased leave for fathers. Although there is an ongoing global debate regarding the optimal length of maternity leave and its impact on women's career reintegration, it is widely recognized that extended leave benefits maternal health and child development.

Significant gaps in legislation remain regarding better maternity protection for all women workers in Lao PDR. Although there are healthcare schemes

available to women in informal sectors, such as farmers, home-based workers and waste pickers, they do not receive the same maternity benefits and protections. Only women workers who have labour contracts and have made minimum contributions to the LSSO can access maternity protection benefits. The lack of support forces these women to return to work soon after childbirth without sufficient recovery time or professional support (Oxfam, 2021).

In response to these gaps, the LWU has highlighted recent efforts to protect domestic workers and women migrant workers through the adoption of a decree on domestic workers. This decree marks progress in extending labour protections to these groups, aligning with ASEAN's broader efforts to improve workers' rights.

BOX 8 Legal provisions for pregnancy and childbirth

ARTICLE 97 THE EMPLOYMENT OF PREGNANT WOMEN OR WOMEN CARING FOR NEWBORN

It is prohibited to employ pregnant women or women caring for a child under one year of age in following work:

- Work in a shop with an elevation of more than two metres;
- Work lifting and carrying by hand, carrying on shoulders, carrying on a pole, or the bearing of loads heavier than ten kilograms;
- Night work;
- Overtime or working on rest days;
- Work which involves standing for longer than two consecutive hours;
- Works specified in the list of hazardous works.

Women are pregnant or caring for a newborn must be reassigned from any of the prohibited activities to a safer position, while ensuring her salary or wages remain unchanged.

ARTICLE 98 MATERNITY LEAVE BEFORE AND AFTER GIVING BIRTH

- Women are entitled to a minimum of 105 days of maternity leave, with at least 42 days taken post-birth. In cases of giving birth to twins, the leave extends to at least 120 days.
- During maternity leave, employees receive their full salary or wages.

- If additional leave is needed due to complications arising from childbirth, women are entitled to subsidies as specified by the Law on Social Security.
- After childbirth, women can take one hour daily for up to a year to rest, care for their child, or attend vaccination appointments.
- Women who miscarry are entitled to a leave period as prescribed by a physician, during which they will continue to receive their normal salary or wages.

ARTICLE 99 MATERNITY SUPPORT

Women have the right to receive an allowance for giving birth or miscarriage as determined by the Law on Social Security.

ARTICLE 100 PROHIBITED ACTIONS AGAINST FEMALE EMPLOYEES

Following actions against female employees are prohibited from employers:

- Check for pregnancy before accepting the employee;
- Create conditions that block or deny female employees who are married or pregnant;
- Cancel the employment contract due to marriage or pregnancy.

Section 5

Challenges to furthering the care agenda

As discussed in the previous sections, Lao PDR has made progress in legislation and policy development for gender equality. However, challenges remain in policy implementation, funding, traditional gender norms, data collection, and regional gaps in infrastructure and services to redistribute unpaid care work.

Despite notable achievements in developing legal frameworks that promote women's rights and gender equality, the implementation of these laws is lacking, especially in remote areas. Resource constraints, insufficient training on the nuances of these laws, and inadequate translation of legal terms into local dialects limit the effectiveness of these frameworks (LWU, 2019). The gap in implementing legislation is particularly significant when it comes to persons with disabilities. Despite existing legislation, there is a lack of strong mechanisms to enforce their rights, resulting in limited access to healthcare services, education, employment and public buildings and transportation. For example, skills and vocational training programmes are not tailored to meet the special needs of persons with disabilities, excluding them from the labour market (Lao PDR, 2021). Children with developmental and intellectual disabilities also face challenges as they are often not integrated into the mainstream educational system. Inadequate support for persons with disabilities increases the care responsibilities placed on family members, typically women. This added burden may restrict their participation in the workforce, education and leisure as well as increase stress, exacerbating gender inequalities.

Limited funding also poses a significant barrier to advancing the care agenda, particularly in the sectors crucial for social welfare, such as education and health. For example, the national education system, a key component of societal development and gender equality, receives funding well below the 18 per cent benchmark proposed in the Education Law (Viraphanh,

2023). This underfunding severely limits the capacity of the education sector to support essential services that affect the quality of teaching and learning, including difficulty of recruitment due to low salaries and limited training for teachers. Further, inadequate funding restricts the ability to build robust national statistics systems, such as gender-disaggregated data, and to conduct necessary awareness and capacity-building activities, which are crucial for implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and similar frameworks (LWU, 2019). Reliance on the state's budget alone is insufficient, which requires increased efforts to mobilize both national and international financial resources to support these activities.

Traditional gender norms heavily influence the distribution of unpaid care work onto women. Despite improvements in infrastructure and household incomes, which have reduced the overall time spent on unpaid care activities, significant gaps remain. Women report spending more time on these duties than men, which not only affects their health but also limits their opportunities for paid jobs. The community does recognize the efforts of women as important, but this recognition rarely translates into a redistribution of household responsibilities. Men's general unwillingness to engage in domestic work, with a cultural view of such tasks as unproductive and a waste of time, continues to reinforce traditional gender roles. This resistance to change in household dynamics highlights a broader societal preference for economic gains over addressing fundamental inequities.

The lack of comprehensive, gender-disaggregated and care-specific data significantly impedes the ability to monitor, analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programmes at the national level. This absence of reliable data affects all stakeholders, limiting their ability to implement evidence-based interventions. Without detailed data

that accounts for sex, urban/rural location, upland/lowland areas, ethno-linguistic groups and disabilities, it is difficult to tailor policies that effectively address the diverse needs and circumstances of the population. This gap in data collection and analysis leads to a policymaking process that can be considered gender-blind, potentially overlooking critical aspects of care needs and gender dynamics within the country.

The huge gaps in infrastructure and awareness of gender equality between urban and rural areas present difficulties in equitable care distribution and access to services. Women in rural areas suffer from a lack of access to quality education, healthcare and economic opportunities, and spend a disproportionate amount of time on unpaid care work (UNDP, 2022a). For instance, children in rural areas are less likely to attend ECE, a situation further exacerbated in areas without road access. In some southern provinces, less than 20 per cent of children aged 36–59 months attend ECE, compared to 63.8 per cent in the capital, Vientiane in 2017 (LSB, 2018). The main constraints include a lack of funding for constructing more ECE facilities and the difficulty of recruiting qualified ECE teachers to work in remote communities. Similarly, healthcare access and quality

vary widely, with rural residents often relying on traditional practitioners due to inadequate healthcare facilities (ADB and World Bank, 2012). Ethnic groups whose cultural roles reinforce gender stereotypes and who have limited Lao language proficiency and technical skills face even greater constraints to inclusion and access.

Economic migration reshapes the demographic and care landscapes in Lao PDR, placing increased care work on older persons. As adults migrate in search of better employment opportunities, they leave behind children and grandparents who then assume greater care responsibilities. This shift doubles the care responsibility on older persons and places additional demands on them to maintain household stability (ADB, 2020). Remittances provide some financial relief, but they are not a substitute for the physical presence of caregivers. Additionally, the migration trend increases the demand for more robust social services such as schools and preschools to support the older persons in managing these expanded roles. The government and community organizations face challenges in meeting these needs, particularly in rural areas where resources are more limited and the effects of poverty are more pronounced.

Section 6

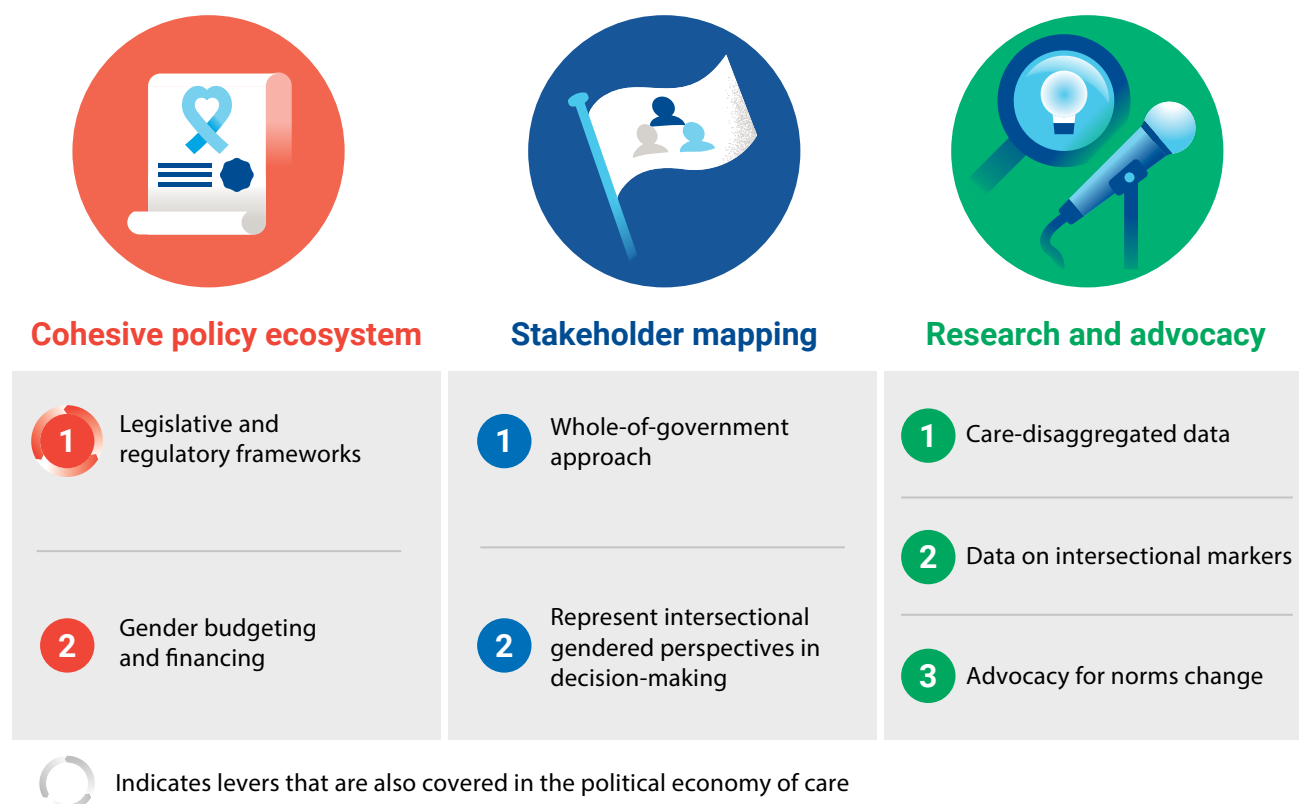
Recommendations for action planning

Unpaid care and domestic work are fundamental to the functioning of societies, economies and political systems. Those engaged in these tasks not only enhance the mental and emotional wellbeing of individuals but also contribute to economic expansion, sustainability and community resilience. The importance of recognizing and supporting this vital labour is increasingly emphasized in policy discussions.

Figure 2 identifies levers of change to successfully implement a care-sensitive and gender-differentiated

policy agenda. The recent ESCAP report (2021b: 57), *Addressing Unpaid Care Work in ASEAN*, outlines six levers of change: care and gender-disaggregated data, legal and regulatory frameworks, gender-responsive budgeting, focus on norm change, inclusion of women's voices in decision-making and an overall whole-of-government approach, identified in prior ESCAP work. Throughout the outcomes of national consultations, these levers were modified and adapted, the most recent language being that of seven levers, as depicted in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 Seven levers of change to mainstream care policies



6.1 Recommendations for recognizing and redistributing women's unpaid care work

The following recommendations are proposed for policymakers in Lao PDR to consider specific actionable measures to address the issues of women's unpaid care and domestic work.

1 A whole-of-government approach to policy development and implementation

Implementing a whole-of-government approach is crucial for reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. This approach enables various ministries and government machineries at all levels to support gender mainstreaming in national policies and development plans (ESCAP, 2021b). The 9th NSEDP Financing Strategy of Lao PDR was developed adopting a whole-of-government approach led by the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) with other relevant ministries and development partners (MPI, 2022). This approach is further exemplified by efforts to improve care infrastructure, as discussed in [Section 4.1](#).

However, challenges remain in fully integrating care work into national agendas, including the 9th Five-Year NSEDP. The lack of comprehensive data impedes the development and implementation of evidence-based, care-responsive policies. Strategic collaboration between relevant ministries is therefore essential to overcoming these barriers. For example, there has been insufficient support for care-related social protection for informal workers (see [Section 4.2](#)). Enhancing collaboration between relevant stakeholders, as demonstrated by ESCAP's national care consultation – which successfully brought together ministries such as the LWU, MoLSW, LFTU, LSB, MPI and MOF alongside a diverse range of other stakeholders – can serve as a good practice to address these gaps (ESCAP, 2024b). Improving the national database through the LSB and MPI and securing adequate budget allocation from MPI, the National Assembly and MOF will be critical steps in ensuring care-sensitive and gender-differentiated social protection initiatives (ESCAP, 2024b).

2 Capacity building for gender-responsive budgeting

Gender-responsive budgeting can lead to tangible improvements in the lives of women and girls (ESCAP, 2024c). Recognizing this, the government amended its Law on State Budget in 2015 to include Article 6 (11), explicitly requiring that state budget expenditures promote gender equality (LWU, 2019). In 2016, NCAW

organized the first gender budgeting workshop in collaboration with and supported by ESCAP. This workshop was pivotal in disseminating the principles of gender-responsive budgeting among various stakeholders, including ministries and development partners and sharing good practices from other countries in the region. Despite these progressive steps, the application of gender-responsive budgeting in the country faces substantial gaps, primarily due to limited financial resources and a budgeting process that typically approves only broad expenditure without sufficient detail on the purpose of spending on a line item (ADB, 2005, 2008). This restricts the ability to implement wide-reaching changes towards gender equality. To address these limitations, it is important to improve both the funding and human resources dedicated to gender-responsive budgeting. Strengthening technical gender expertise and securing sustainable financial resources are critical for expanding the scope and impact of gender budgeting in the country. This will enable more effective tracking of public spending and ensure that gender mainstreaming is incorporated at all stages of budget planning and execution.

3 Changing social attitudes and norms to equally redistribute unpaid care work

Addressing entrenched gender norms is essential to equitably redistribute unpaid care work between men and women. Although infrastructure improvements and rising household incomes have reduced the unpaid care and domestic work for women, there remains an imbalance in the sharing of these responsibilities. Despite some community recognition of and acceptance of gender equality, there is reluctance of men to share the workload as they perceive housework as a waste of time. This highlights the necessity of actively promoting and implementing strategies that encourage men to participate more in domestic work, shaping societal attitudes on the gendered division of labour and recognizing that such changes are crucial for allowing women to engage more in paid work. An example of this approach can be seen in the Good Men campaign in Cambodia (United Nations Population Fund, 2015). This initiative targeted men aged 15 to 49, using TV and radio spots, posters, brochures and other materials to promote positive behavioral change. The campaign emphasized messages such as “Good men give value to women,” aiming to reshape societal attitudes and encourage men's participation in domestic work. Similar practices can be adopted to the national context of Lao PDR to convey culturally relevant messages that foster attitude changes, particularly among younger generations.

4 Enhancing women's representation in decision-making across all levels of government

Substantial efforts are required to ensure that improvements in women's representation within the National Assembly are reflected throughout various levels of government. In addition to participating in central government, it is essential to increase women's participation in local governance bodies, such as water user committees, farmer associations, road maintenance committees and resettlement committees and to systematically document the proportion of female representation in these groups. Supporting the appointment of women to subordinate government positions, including village chiefs, district and vice-district governors and provincial governors, is important. The use of LWU memberships across its various levels should continue to promote women's representation within government and political party structures, as well as to encourage women to advance to higher governmental positions.

5 Improving data on intersectional markers and on care

To effectively address gender-specific vulnerabilities, there is a strong need to enhance the collection and utilization of sex- and gender-disaggregated data, such as sex, urban/rural, upland/lowland, ethno-linguistic group and persons with disabilities through national surveys. Despite recent progress in this area, there is a notable deficiency in the capacity of the National Statistics and Analysis of Women (NSAW) agencies and sectoral ministries to analyse and interpret this data adequately. Findings from its recent Household Care Survey emphasize the importance of such data in identifying gaps in unpaid care and domestic work. Women spend an estimated 3 hours and 50 minutes daily on unpaid care tasks – almost twice as much as men and their paid work averages 5 hours and 17 minutes per day, lower than 6 hours 43 minutes by men (Oxfam, 2024). Nearly 30 per cent of women cite caregiving as their main barrier to employment (NCAWMC, 2024: 26). These demands are even higher in rural and agricultural communities, particularly during farming seasons when over a third of households face challenges in managing care responsibilities (Oxfam, 2024). To better inform policy responses, it is important to develop custom indicators that go beyond existing mandatory categories, which will better measure socioeconomic changes and address the unique challenges faced by different groups across various regions (Charla et al., 2022). Such detailed monitoring is essential to developing targeted interventions, including enhanced social protection measures, to improve gender outcomes across all regions.

6 Promoting public engagement of initiatives

Promoting public engagement and raising awareness of all initiatives is essential to their success. As mentioned in the previous [section 4.2](#), few people are aware of schemes like the NSSF, which limits participation. Public awareness campaigns should utilize accessible platforms, such as local media, community meetings and social media, to inform people about these initiatives and their benefits. Collaboration with community leaders and grassroots organizations can help reach marginalized groups effectively. Ensuring clear and simple messaging can empower more individuals to participate and benefit from these initiatives.

6.2 Recommendations for care policies

The following recommendations speak to four policy categories of care.



1 CARE INFRASTRUCTURE

Investment in infrastructure and public services by multilateral development partners plays a key role in easing women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work, especially in impoverished rural areas. Developing infrastructure such as roads, electricity supply, telecommunication systems, water supply, schools, hospitals and other essential public services can alleviate the time poverty many women face. Enhancing and reducing the gap in access to infrastructure, as integrated into the 9th NSEDP, targets gender equality by ensuring inclusive and equitable access to essential public services. This will contribute to reducing the time women spend on daily tasks such as fetching water, washing clothes, bringing children to school and cooking.

Furthermore, to effectively alleviate the impact of unpaid work, it is important to make labour-saving devices, such as washing machines, refrigerators, electric rice cookers and water pumps, more affordable and accessible, particularly to the most vulnerable groups, such as women-headed households, low-income families and the elderly. The development of social protection programmes that include subsidies or special credit schemes can help these groups afford such technologies. There should also be an increased focus on the development and adoption of time-saving technologies, such as mobile finance

and market price validation applications (ADB, 2020). Although these technologies have not yet been prioritized in policy dialogues, their integration could greatly help reduce gender inequalities in unpaid care work.



2 CARE-RELATED SOCIAL PROTECTION

Implementing tailored social protection and welfare policies is needed, especially for poor households and disadvantaged groups, including low-income rural workers, older persons and persons with disabilities, many of whom still face limited access to the social security system. Children, particularly those under three years old from poor households and those requiring special protection, also lack systematic social welfare services. The NSPS aims to address these gaps through a gradual expansion of coverage. To ensure universal access and effective implementation, it is essential to develop financial sustainability measures, strengthen institutional capacity, enhance the enforcement of social security laws and raise awareness about available social protection schemes.

Informal workers, in particular, require greater attention, as they face numerous challenges that are often overlooked in national policies. To strengthen support for this group involves improving the quality of services provided by VSS, simplifying registration and claim processes and ensuring that health services meet the needs of these workers. Enhancing support for informal workers not only improves individual wellbeing but also contributes to broader socioeconomic development in the country.



3 CARE SERVICES

Early childhood education and care programmes play a significant role in reducing women's unpaid care work; however, their effectiveness requires policy intervention. Although infrastructural developments have lessened the time on unpaid care and domestic work spent by women, childcare responsibilities remain unchanged (ADB, 2020), highlighting a demand for accessible, high-quality childcare that many parents find lacking. To address this, it is essential to improve the availability and quality of early childhood education and care services. This involves implementing high-standard, child-centred programmes that not only support early childhood education but also enable increased participation of women in the labour market. Aligning with UN Women's recommendations, there is a critical need to develop alternatives to family care. This can be achieved by offering services that provide quality care, ensuring adequate working conditions for care workers and promoting a greater share of caregiving responsibilities among men.



4 EMPLOYMENT-RELATED CARE POLICIES

Employment laws in Lao PDR should address the critical gap in maternity benefits for informal workers, ensuring all mothers, regardless of their employment status, receive adequate support and recovery time post-childbirth. Standardizing employment contracts across all sectors, along with the introduction of the term paternity leave, would promote shared parental responsibilities and gender equality in the workplace. Extending the duration of maternity leave to align with WHO recommendations of six months can also support parents during the early development stages of their child and enhance long-term employee productivity and satisfaction, although three months are also considered appropriate by people facing financial difficulties (Lao National Institute of Public Health, 2015).

Section 7

Conclusion

Lao PDR has made significant strides in gender equality, demonstrated by improvements in healthcare services, educational attainments and legislative frameworks that promote women's rights. However, challenges remain, especially in ensuring that these improvements are inclusive and reach the most marginalized communities, including ethnic minorities and rural populations.

In Lao PDR, the extensive labour of unpaid care work, predominantly performed by women, is a critical yet often invisible component of the country's socioeconomic structure. Unpaid care work, ranging from childcare to household management, is important for the wellbeing of families and communities, but is rarely acknowledged in economic measures or compensated in financial terms.

The impact of unpaid care on women is profound, consuming considerable time and energy that could otherwise be invested in education, leisure or formal employment. This disproportionate responsibility exacerbates gender equality and limits women's economic participation, perpetuating traditional gender roles. The situation is even more severe in rural regions of Lao PDR, where access to basic services like clean water and efficient transport is limited, thereby leaving women with little choice but to trek large distances for these essential things.

Despite notable advancements in public infrastructure – improved access to water, electricity and transport – these developments have not fundamentally shifted the gender dynamics that dictate the distribution of unpaid care work. As living standards rise, without changes in social norms, the domestic expectations placed upon women rise too, often intensifying rather than alleviating their unpaid duties.

Addressing the challenges associated with unpaid care requires a comprehensive strategy. Enhanced infrastructure development that eases the physical demands of care-related tasks is crucial. However, infrastructure alone is insufficient. Legislative reforms are essential in redefining how unpaid care is valued within Lao society and economy. Policies must recognize the economic worth of unpaid care and domestic work and aim to redistribute these responsibilities more equitably. Enacting inclusive social protection policies and programmes, particularly for workers in the informal sector, persons with disabilities and older persons, can affirm and enhance the recognition of these essential contributions to the economy.

Moreover, to transform the valuation of unpaid care, there must be an intensive effort to integrate care metrics into national planning and budgeting processes. This integration would ensure that unpaid care is accounted for not just as an adjunct but as an integral component of economic and social policy frameworks. Doing so could build a more accurate representation of its value and drive policies that not only recognize but actively support caregivers.

Cultural shifts are imperative, challenging norms that frame care work as exclusively women's responsibility. Programmes that educate and engage both men and women in discussions about shared responsibilities can lead to more equitable household dynamics. By promoting male involvement in caregiving and domestic work, these programmes help to dismantle long-standing stereotypes and redistribute care labour more effectively.

SECTION 7: CONCLUSION

In addition, building partnerships with local and international NGOs can amplify efforts to support unpaid caregivers. These collaborations can provide resources, support networks and advocacy platforms that empower women and push for structural changes within communities.

Investing in the care economy offers a strategic pathway for Lao PDR to achieve its development goals, including poverty reduction, gender equality and sustainable economic growth. But these goals would

only be realized through establishing a sustainable and equitable framework where unpaid care and domestic work are recognized as collective societal duties. Achieving this requires continuous advocacy, comprehensive policy development and reform and a shift in public consciousness to value unpaid care work. By prioritizing and investing in the care economy, the country can enhance its human capital, promote gender equality and create a more robust and resilient economy.

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