THE ECOSYSTEM FOR WOMEN’S ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LAO PDR

Networks, Associations, and Other Activities and Services That Support Women Entrepreneurs in Lao PDR

March 2016

This publication was produced by Nathan Associates Inc., for review by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID.)
THE ECOSYSTEM FOR WOMEN’S ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LAO PDR

Networks, Associations, and Other Activities and Services That Support Women Entrepreneurs in Lao PDR

DISCLAIMER

This document is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author or authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.
CONTENTS

1. Introduction 1

2. Background: Women in the Economy 2

3. Organizations, Networks, Activities, and Services 4
   Organizations That Support Women’s Basic Livelihoods 4
   Business Associations and Women’s Business Networks 4
   Umbrella Organizations That Support Women’s Interests 6
   Financial Resources and Services 6
   Technology-Oriented Resources and Services 8
   Corporate and Donor Initiatives 8
   Private Social Enterprises 9
   Government Services 10
1. INTRODUCTION

This document provides an overview of the major organizations, networks, firms, activities and services that, directly or indirectly, support the economic empowerment of women in Lao PDR particularly as entrepreneurs. The overview discusses services available for women entrepreneurs in all parts of the economy and in both rural and urban settings. It also reviews service availability for women in various business roles—operating informal microenterprises or small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) or leading larger firms. Prepared by USAID’s ASEAN Connectivity through Trade and Investment (ACTI) project, this document is intended to serve as a resource for individuals, companies, and others who seek to connect to woman-owned enterprises, access resources for women in business, or otherwise learn from the business experience of women entrepreneurs. ACTI will periodically update this document with new information submitted by interested parties. The electronic version of this document is embedded with links to resources, organizational websites, and additional useful information.

The general background summarizes conditions facing women in the Lao economy as of 2015. It is followed by an eight-section overview describing key resources for supporting and promoting women entrepreneurs in the country. The first four sections cover: (1) organizations that support women’s welfare and basic livelihoods, (2) general business associations and women’s business networks, (3) umbrella groups that support women’s interests, and (4) financial resources and services. The last four sections are: (5) technology-oriented organizations and associations, (6) corporate and donor initiatives, (7) private social enterprises, and (8) government services.
2. BACKGROUND: WOMEN IN THE ECONOMY

The changes in the economy of Lao PDR over the past generation have been vast. Between 1992 and 2013, the country’s rate of poverty dropped by more than half—from around 46 percent to 22 percent. Industrial production, investment, and exports have grown significantly, and the country’s admission to the WTO in 2013 represented an important milestone in its overall commitment to market economics. Increasingly, entrepreneurship is seen as a viable avenue toward greater prosperity in both rural and urban areas. Although Laos has a small population (6.8 million), its companies have ever-greater access to markets, due in significant part to the emergence of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). New enterprises in Laos also have increasing access to finance, through both formal and informal financial institutions.

Nonetheless, in 2015 most of Laos’ labor force remains engaged in agriculture, where productivity continues to be low and workers do not yet possess the networks, financial tools, and skills that will help them move to better-paying opportunities, either as entrepreneurs or as workers in the changing economy. Women are particularly disadvantaged compared to men: nearly one in four is illiterate, and, in a country where earnings are meager for nearly everyone, women earn 25 percent less than men. As in many economies, women and men tend to be segregated into certain jobs, particularly in the agriculture sector, with the contributions of women typically valued less than that of men. Furthermore, women are poorly represented in groups that have a direct impact on their livelihoods, including water-use committees, farmers’ associations, and road maintenance committees.

At the same time, more than 40 percent of all enterprises in Lao PDR are at least partially owned by women, and especially in urban areas, the majority of newly registered enterprises are woman-owned. Given the traditional expectation that females will serve as primary caregivers, women entrepreneurs tend to locate their enterprises in their homes or at local marketplaces. Their businesses are generally less mobile than firms started by men—for example, they are less likely to integrate the use of a vehicle—and woman-owned enterprises are usually smaller and employ fewer workers than companies owned by men. In 2014, the Lao Businesswomen’s Association (LBWA) characterized the majority of women-run businesses as micro in scale, adding that skilled workers, given the choice, choose higher-paying or less risky government jobs over entrepreneurship. LBWA attributed the limited growth of woman-owned enterprises to a lack of systems in place to support them.
A 2011 assessment sponsored by the World Bank Group as part of the infoDev initiative examined the environment for women’s entrepreneurship in the Mekong Delta. It identified some common limitations facing woman entrepreneurs in Lao PDR and the region. These included:

- Limited exposure to innovative practices, resulting in little product differentiation
- Lack of formal business training and limited opportunities for acquiring additional technical, financial, and management skills for managers and staff
- Extremely limited access to networking opportunities, with a particular lack of successful role models for businesswomen
- Poor access to capital for expansion
- Mindset limitations, such as low confidence, poor tolerance for risk, and inflexibility/low propensity to perceive and adapt to market demands

Women in Lao PDR increasingly are becoming aware of how business networks may help them address these constraints. For example, social enterprises, especially in the handicraft sector, connect women in rural areas to opportunities to develop their skills and sell their products in larger markets, often through companies that are owned and operated by other women. Furthermore, although business networking has not been generally accepted by most adult women in Laos, young people are becoming more accustomed to sharing business practices and opportunities and learning from one another. Organizations such as the Young Entrepreneurs Association of Laos (YEAL) and informal business meet-ups connect young people, including many women, to one another and to mentors.

Gaining access to capital is a complex matter for women in Laos. Financial services from the commercial banking system are generally out of reach for most woman-owned enterprises. Savings and credit are available through formal and informal microfinance opportunities, but their operations remain relatively opaque, particularly in the large informal lending arena. Nonetheless, sources of microfinance not regulated by the country’s central bank—such as those operated by the Lao Women’s Union—include significant numbers of woman-owned enterprises and represent an important part of the social fabric, especially in the country’s rural communities.

The notion of women’s agency—voice and participation—has steadily advanced in Lao PDR. Since 2002, women’s political representation in the National Assembly has grown nearly 20 percent. It is now among the highest in the region. However, as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank reported in 2012, the increases in representation have not filtered down to the provincial governments and women are still poorly represented at the local level.

Today, Lao PDR has a clear opportunity to harness the power of its economic expansion to both improve human development outcomes and to ensure that growth is inclusive. Empowerment of women is a critical component of this opportunity. This overview identifies organizations, networks, activities, and services that support women’s entrepreneurship and can serve as models for developing and leveraging efforts to assist woman-owned enterprises.
3. ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS, ACTIVITIES, AND SERVICES

ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT WOMEN’S BASIC LIVELIHOODS

Lao Disabled Women’s Development Centre. Disabled women are among the most vulnerable populations in Lao PDR. Social stigma and physical difficulties make it unlikely that they will attend school. Particularly in rural areas, most of these women have only primary school educations, if they have any at all. Each year women with disabilities come from around Laos to live and study for nine months at the Lao Disabled Women’s Development Centre. Since 2002, the facility has provided vocational training in sewing, weaving, and handicrafts for cohorts of about 20 women. The network of alumni—women that have moved on from the program—assist in starting small businesses in their villages.

Participatory Development Training Center (PADTEC). Established in 1996 under the Ministry of Education’s Department of Private Education, PADTEC is a Vientiane-based, non-profit training facility. It promotes eco-friendly technologies and helps microenterprises enhance education and engage in income-generating activities. The group’s areas of focus include capacity-building for organizations, service delivery through learning centers and networks, and leadership and advocacy for Lao women with a special focus on Hmong minority women. Often with support from the donor community, PADTEC actively promoting in agricultural and participatory community development in the rural areas of Lao PDR and a large proportion of its beneficiaries are women.

Women in Laos. This NGO was established by private European donors to help single mothers in Laos support their families. Women in Laos offers: one-on-one mentoring and support by trained female Lao social workers, participation in support groups and trainings, small grants tailored to participants’ needs, and access to income-generation and employment opportunities. The organization operates through funds privately raised around the world.

BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS AND WOMEN’S BUSINESS NETWORKS

Lao Businesswomen’s Association (LBWA). Founded in 2004 to provide a network for woman-owned businesses, LBWA is a branch of the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
LBWA is the largest association of business and professional women in the country. Its membership consists of approximately 300 woman-led enterprises located throughout Lao PDR. The group aims to enhance the growth and competitiveness of women’s enterprises by helping the entrepreneurs update and upgrade their management and business skills. LBWA currently operates under a 5-year plan (2014-19), which includes building networks between its membership and other enterprises in the ASEAN Economic Community, as well as facilitating other international opportunities. LBWA representatives, including those from the Champasak province chapter, attended the first ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Forum in Hanoi in 2014 and also supported the infoDev project that examined livelihoods of Mekong women.

**Lao Handicraft Association (LHA).** Based in Vientiane, LHA is a member of the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry. LHA offices are located in five provinces, including Luang Prabang, Xiengkhouang, Houaphan, Savannakhet, and Champasak. Women entrepreneurs are an important stakeholder group in the organization because they dominate the handicraft sector, especially textiles. LHA represents the interests of more than 75 enterprises engaged in producing and selling: textiles; non-timber forest products; jewelry made of gold, silver, and bronze; cultural products; recycled goods; and pottery. The group supports handicraft festivals and other opportunities to connect handicraft producers with markets around the world.

**Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI).** This business association represents and supports the country’s private sector and includes a significant portion of formally registered enterprises in the country. LNCCI, which has a focus on SMEs, includes more than 4000 members represented through chambers of commerce in 13 provinces and at least 20 business associations and groups. The individual business associations that participate in LNCCI represent several sectors of the economy including coffee producers, agribusinesses, the automotive industry, furniture makers, hotels and restaurants, and the garment industry. Several other groups, including LBWA, also participate. LNCCI sponsors conferences, training and advocacy opportunities, and exhibitions. LNCCI provides potential investors with information and connections to local business people. Among the issues that LNCCI is exploring on behalf of its membership is how businesses in the country will be impacted by AEC’s development and which opportunities are associated with greater integration of the regional market.

**Young Entrepreneurs Association of Laos (YEAL).** Formed in 2005 under the auspices of the Laos Youth Union, YEAL is a volunteer-driven, nonprofit organization with a mandate to support young people in business and advance economic growth. Targeted toward business owners age 45 and under, YEAL helps members avoid the pitfalls of entrepreneurship and provides various opportunities to learn from each other's experiences and to benefit from peer mentorship. YEAL members often attend professional and social events associated with ASEAN. The organization has an active social media presence, regularly reaching out through Facebook and other electronic networks to inform members about activities and initiatives. Although the membership is predominantly male, women are welcome and encouraged to participate.
UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT WOMEN’S INTERESTS

Gender and Development Association (GDA). Formed in 1991 by the Lao Women’s Union, UNICEF, and a number of international NGOs, the GDA consists of approximately 20 NGOs working in Lao PDR. Together, they sponsor meetings for coordinating and sharing experiences in the area of gender and development programming. The group also provides external training and consulting services. For example, OXFAM International supports a GDA initiative aimed at helping women and men in rural villages create products from banana fiber, natural bamboo, or other agricultural products. This program trains workers and micro-entrepreneurs to improve product quality and marketing in order to increase their income. As another example, in 2012, the Asia Foundation initiated a 3-year program to enable the GDA to expand its Sustainable Women’s Empowerment and Leadership Project, which trains groups of women in leadership and public speaking skills on an ongoing basis in Sangthong district, Vientiane Capital, and Maed district in Vientiane Province. GDA’s overall vision, according to their website, is to “contribute to a society where women are empowered and can live ... without violence and discrimination” and where “women can work along with men to reduce poverty and benefit from opportunities for development.”

FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Agricultural Promotion Bank (APB). The bank is specifically committed to serving the country’s rural and disadvantaged populations. Established in 1993, APB is well represented in rural areas and provides services to borrowers who most often would be considered too risky by other lenders. It has received support over the years from donor institutions, such as ADP, which has assisted with human resource development and other types of capacity-building. The APB issues small loans to men and women to cover a range of expenses, for example a car or motorbike, education, appliances, healthcare, etc. Repayment typically takes place through deduction from the borrower’s wages. The rate of interest from the APB is 15 percent. Although high, this rate is lower than the market rates, which are marked up from steep prime lending rates of 23 percent to 25 percent.

Lao Development Bank (LDB). Established in 2003 through the merger of two predecessor institutions, the LDB is a state-owned commercial bank with 100 percent of its capital owned by the country’s Ministry of Finance (MOF). According to its website, LDB is charged by the “State/Party’s policies and guidelines” to “stimulate the national social-economic development.” The bank serves its customers in a variety of ways, such as providing savings accounts and international money transfers. The LDB also engages in lending to all types of SMEs and has recently developed mobile banking products. Although many of its customers are women, the bank does not appear to offer services specifically oriented toward woman-owned enterprises.

Commercial Banks. The community of more than 30 commercial banks in Laos has grown rapidly since 2010, both with respect to the number of licensed banks and the value of their assets and credits. As of 2014, four state-owned banks accounted for 55 percent of total capital, 64 percent of total loans, and 64 percent of total deposits in the commercial banking system. Different banks offer services targeting different types of consumers. The largest foreign-owned bank, Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Limited (commonly called ANZ), focuses on
The highest-value customers. The Banque Pour le Commerce Exterieur Lao Public (also known as BCEL), a former state-owned bank that currently trades on the Laos Securities Exchange, represents a huge swath of the country’s smaller and mid-sized enterprises. Other banks, including those formed as joint ventures, focus on customers doing business in Vietnam, Thailand, China, and other countries. Commercial interest rates in Laos are high—beginning approximately at 26 percent—and are considered inaccessible for the majority of woman-owned SMEs. Gender-disaggregated statistics about lending from commercial banks are not publicly available.

Unlicensed Microfinance Lenders. A large, informal, and essentially unregulated microlending sector has been in place in Laos, mostly in its rural villages, since the mid-1990s. Participants in the sector include approximately 4400 village development funds (significantly supported by mining companies and other outside groups) with an aggregated portfolio of an estimated 37 million USD, encompassing around 430,000 members. They also include a loose network of approximately 3100 women’s “savings groups,” sponsored by LWU. The groups engage in lending, serve almost 200,000 people and, as of 2014, hold up to 22 million USD. There are also a number of rotating savings and credit associations in place in Laos, each involving about 12 people who contribute around 1 million kip (around 125 USD) to a single fund every month for a year. Group members have the opportunity to “borrow” the sum of 12 million kip once each year, and are reportedly expected to pay that amount back to the group.

 Licensed Microfinance Institutions (MFIs). This sector includes three types of institutions: (1) savings and credit unions, (2) non-deposit taking MFIs, and (3) deposit-taking MFIs. As of 2012, according to the World Bank, the Bank of Lao PDR had licensed 8 deposit taking MFIs (DT MFIs); 13 saving and credit unions (SCUs); 10 non-deposit taking MFIs (NDT MFIs); 1 “post” bank, and 2 co-ops. These institutions served 82,000 customers (1.3 percent of the country’s total population), many of whom are women and ethnic minorities. The MFIs reportedly held deposits from approximately 46,000 people and extended loans to 36,000 borrowers, also as of 2012.

Microfinance Association (MFA). Established in 2007, MFA and its members represent a growing share of the country’s industry. The group shares information among its members and serves as a voice of the formal microfinance community to the government and the public. Members include MFIs, as well as donors, training institutes, and individual experts and advocates. The 32 member MFIs make up roughly 50 percent of Laos’ formal microfinance industry by number of clients. Members implement microlending projects supported by the ADB, the German government, the Lao government’s Participatory Development Training Center, the International Labor Organization, the U.N. Capital Development Fund, and the World Education Consortium.

Community Development Funds (CDF). The Minerals Law of 2008 requires investors in Laos’ mining sector to support community development funds that channel revenues generated by mining operations back into communities, especially villages in rural areas where public services are weak and the local population is underserved by central and local authorities. CDFs can help build local government capacity and compensate community members negatively affected by mining operations. Each community should have significant input into how the funds are used, and may determine that the funds should make loans to local small businesses and farmers. The
best information about CDFs can be found in sustainability reports developed by international mining companies. For example, the Australian firm PanAust reported in 2014 that it budgeted US$665,500 for CDF activities in three different mining communities. The activities implemented through the fund included 46 small-scale projects focused on education, health, agricultural development, microfinance, and infrastructure. With respect to microfinance, the company reported that, since 2010, it had helped 12 local communities establish microfinance schemes through Village Savings and Credit Funds which provided their 1,500 members—most of whom are women—with access to savings and loan facilities that otherwise might not be available in their rural communities. Members use their loans to support a variety of small-scale income-generating activities, as well as to cover household expenditures such as education and healthcare. Village-level management committees provide oversight for the schemes, which are supervised by a district supervisory committee headed by LWU. In 2014, just over $200,000 in savings was deposited, according to PanAust.

TECHNOLOGY-ORIENTED RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Facebook and Other Social Media. Lao entrepreneurs are increasingly aware of social media’s potential as sources of contacts and customers. PADETC, YEAL, LBWA, and the Mekong Women Entrepreneurship Challenge (MWEC) have Facebook presences, although the degree to which these are maintained is inconsistent.

Global Shapers. This World Economic Forum initiative is a network of online “hubs” developed and led by young people who have the desire to contribute to their communities. There are currently more than 3,000 Global Shapers organized in 300 Hubs in over 150 countries. The Vientiane Hub was founded by nine young business people, five of whom are women, including one winner of the 2013 MWEC Lao.

CORPORATE AND DONOR INITIATIVES

Community Development Funds. Supported in significant part by large-scale investors into Laos’ mining sector, community development funds are discussed in the section on financial resources and services.

infoDev. This multi-donor group supported by the World Bank focuses on building innovative enterprises, including those started and developed by women. In 2012, through funding from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the government of Finland, infoDev embarked on the Mekong Women’s Entrepreneurship Challenge, to strengthen the abilities and confidence of leading women entrepreneurs and to help them build their professional networks. The objective was to help a selected group of 25 women understand and apply innovation, creativity, and competitiveness to their businesses. The project was predicated on the theory that entrepreneurs learn best from their peers, sharing practical experiences and lessons that will improve their confidence, risk-taking tolerance, and management skills. The program featured peer learning focused on key business topics and themes. These included marketing, resource management and budgeting, time management and lifestyle choices, and financial benchmarking as well as network and joint venture formation, financing, and quality development. In 2012-13, infoDev also sponsored a contest for woman-owned enterprises in Laos, rewarding the 10 winners with business coaching, marketing connections, and access to finance. Winners included entrepreneurs
working in various industries, such as coffee, cinema, herbal products, and tourism. According to the final program report, participants said that networking—facilitated through specific activities, the associated sharing, and peer learning—was one of the most important program benefits. The report recommended the creation of an “alumni network.” Although MWEC Laos has a web presence through a dedicated Facebook page, activity was dormant between early 2013 and 2015.

**Supporting Talent, Entrepreneurial Potential, and Success (STEPS).** This 2011 component of the Adolescent Girls Initiative was supported by the World Bank, Australian Aid, and the Young Entrepreneurs Association of Laos. The STEPS program identified and supported young entrepreneurs seeking to start or expand businesses. STEPS promoted both entrepreneurship and employment interventions to help the country realize the potential of young entrepreneurs, especially women, as catalysts for economic growth and stability. The project specifically sought to (1) champion young entrepreneurs seeking to start and expand businesses and (2) provide job placement services to unemployed and recently graduated young women looking for employment in the private sector.

**PRIVATE SOCIAL ENTERPRISES**

**Magic Lao Carpets Handicrafts.** Founded in 1999, Magic Lao Carpets was formed to bring traditional silk carpet making techniques, developed and practiced throughout Central Asia, into Lao PDR. Although carpets historically are not among the handicrafts produced in Laos, Ismet and Souvita Paseuth successfully linked the country’s tradition and expertise in fine textiles to the production of handcrafted kilims (a type of flat-woven carpet) for sale in upscale markets. From its beginning, when Ismet transferred his knowledge of fine carpet making from his native Turkmenistan, the company has operated as a social enterprise dedicated to empowering workers, mostly women, from rural areas. Early in its operations, the company set a high standard for wages and benefits and, over the years, actively discouraged vulnerable women from falling prey to human trafficking and prostitution. The company business model includes training local weavers and opening production facilities in different locations. The kilims produced by Magic Lao have received significant awards and recognition in international markets. In addition to carpet making, the company engages local designers and weavers in the production of high-quality handspun textiles also integrating traditional Lao patterns and motifs. Magic Lao’s owners are active in the operations of the Lao Handicrafts Association.

**Ma Té Sai.** “Ma Té Sai” means “where is it from?” in Lao. The company is based in Luang Prabang and sources handicrafts and agricultural products from groups working in villages across Laos. The Ma Té Sai shop connects these products to the substantial tourist market in Luang Prabang. The firm purchases directly from village artisans, village cooperatives, and organizations formed to empower economically vulnerable people including women. Ma Té Sai sources its products from a variety of ethnic groups, including Lao, TaiLeu, Hmong, Akha, Katu, Yao, Lentan, and Khmu populations. In 2009, with the support of a Malaysian foundation, Ma Té Sai supported women in the Nambak district of Luang Prabang, enabling them to acquire the sewing skills needed for economic support. A group of the women prepared naturally dyed and woven cotton cloth particular to the TaiLeu into garments and homewares then sold by Ma Té Sai.
Mai Savanh Lao. This fair-trade silk and tea company is based in Vientiane. Established in 2005 with a staff of 3, Mai Savanh Lao has grown to employ more than 40 people, about 90 percent of whom are women. Their producer network includes approximately 200 members, most of whom are female. Mai Savanh Lao works with farmers to grow the quality silk cocoons and plants that provide the company with a selection of natural dyes. Its skilled silk weavers, although operating independently, have access to quality looms owned by the company. Mai Savanh Lao is a founding member of Lao’s association of fair trade companies.

Ock Pop Tok. A social enterprise based in Luang Prabang, Ock Pop Tok works primarily in textiles, handicrafts, and design. Ock Pop Tok, meaning “east meets west,” was established in 2000 by a Lao weaver and an English photographer. The organization aims to advance the artistic, cultural, and social development of Lao artisans in Laos and increase the appreciation of the country’s diverse textiles and communities through educational activities. The company empowers women by connecting them to market opportunities for their products and by promoting the export of textiles. Working in conjunction with the Lao National Tourism Administration, development agencies, and LWU, Ock Pop Tok trains artisans from remote areas in textile dyeing and in weaving skills, product design, and business-related skills.

Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC). Founded in 2006 in Luang Prabang, TAEC collects and preserves the traditional arts of the country’s many and diverse ethnic groups. The Centre has expanded to include a collection of ethnic minority artifacts, a small library, and an event space. In July 2014, TAEC opened the TAEC Boutique, a shop featuring handicrafts from ethnic minority artisans in Laos. In addition to its museum and shop functions, TAEC advocates on behalf of ethnic minority communities throughout Laos. For example, it has undertaken cultural mapping exercises with the Hmong community of Ban Na Ouane and has provided advice and training on good practices in heritage management. The Centre also works with local businesses to facilitate partnerships with ethnic minority communities, many of which constitute Laos’ poorest populations. The Centre also runs a livelihood development program helping artisans earn income through their traditional handicraft skills. TAEC supports supplementary livelihoods for more than 600 women and their families in 12 provinces throughout the country.

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Lao Women’s Union (LWU). Established in 1955, the LWU was an outgrowth of the Lao Patriotic Women’s Association. Pursuant to the country’s 1991 Constitution, it is one of Lao PDR’s four official mass organizations. With between 600,000 and 900,000 official members, the LWU’s mandate is to represent the interests of women from all ethnic groups. Today, most women’s economic activity programming in the country, including CDF administration, is dominated by LWU. In fact, to most rural women, there are no other networks of entrepreneurs that are relevant to their livelihoods. LWU has extensive networks at all levels of the state’s administrative structure and thus serves as an important bridge between the ruling party, the government, and the women of Lao PDR for disseminating information on gender issues and mobilizing women’s participation in development and trade integration activities.

National Commission for the Advancement of Women in Lao (NCAW Lao). The commission, formally approved by the Prime Minister in early 2002, is the focal point for gender mainstreaming within the Lao government. NCAW is tasked with formulating and implementing
national policy for the advancement of women, as well as with monitoring implementation of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (to which Lao PDR became a signatory in 1980), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. NCAW is further responsible for overseeing the *National Strategy for the Advancement of Women 2011-15 (NSAW)*, which aims to increase equality between men and women, balance power relationships, increase the number of women in decision making positions, and improve women and girls access to many services and income-earning opportunities. NSAW also has a significant role in achieving the goals of the Seventh Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan and Millennium Development Goals, as well as in fulfilling the obligations of Lao PDR under the U.N. Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other international conventions pertaining to women.