

FIRST WOMEN'S SHELTER IN LAOS



The Asia Foundation supported the establishment and construction of the first women's shelter in the Lao P.D.R.—opening in January 2006—to serve the needs of victims of human trafficking and domestic violence. The establishment of the shelter, a direct result of growing awareness of these problems in Laos and the passage of the 2004 Development and Protection of Women Act, was made possible by the dedicated work of the Lao Women's Union (LWU), which has been supported by the Foundation for more than a decade.

Today, Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the world, plagued by extremely low levels of illiteracy, employment, and high infant mortality rates. Lao women often cannot find work in their villages and must search for jobs elsewhere. Separated from their families and communities, women are highly susceptible to working in slave-like conditions and are vulnerable to traffickers. It is estimated that each year, thousands of Lao women are trafficked to Thailand and other countries. For the women who stay in Laos, many become victims of domestic violence, which is widespread and often goes unreported.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE LAO WOMEN'S UNION: THE FIRST NATIONAL SURVEY

With The Asia Foundation's financial support and technical assistance, the Lao Women's Union conducted the first-ever national research survey on violence against women in Laos. The survey highlighted a number of significant women's issues, including an alarming occurrence of violence against women and an overwhelming lack of resources for victims. According to the findings, Lao victims endured high levels of physical assault

and verbal abuse—at home and in public—with little or no protection from family members or community advocacy groups. This abuse was compounded by Lao women's lack of knowledge about their rights, especially those among ethnic minorities.

The survey also revealed startling and never-before documented statistics, such as the number of women active in the sex service industry in Laos, numbers of missing persons, frequency of cross-border migration, and figures on returned labor migrants.

The survey research found:

- During 2001 to 2002, Thai officials returned 220 trafficked women and girls to Laos. Of those, 74 percent were under the age of 17.
- In many cases, these trafficking victims received no counseling and many were unable to return home due to threats from traffickers or because of the social stigma they would face in their own communities.

NEW LEGAL RIGHTS

The data collected from this groundbreaking survey was disseminated widely to members of government, and was the driving force behind the development and passage of legislation to protect women. The Asia Foundation, working closely with the Lao Women's Union, provided technical assistance in the development of the first law specifically intended to protect women from domestic violence and other forms of abuse—including trafficking. The process of writing the law was designed to seek public input, almost unheard of in Laos, and the result was the first public hearings ever held in Laos.



LAOS

In Laos, the Foundation provided funding for the first shelter for battered women.

With Foundation support, the Lao Women's Union conducted the first-ever national research survey on violence against women in Laos.

The Foundation facilitated the drafting and passage of key legislation in Laos to protect women from trafficking and violence.

As a result, in 2004, the Development and Protection of Women Act—a comprehensive bill—became the first anti-trafficking and domestic violence legislation in the history of Laos. This landmark bill was an important step toward the protection of women and children from various forms of abuse. Additionally, the Lao Women’s Union indicated that in order for the new legislation to be successful—for women and children to gain security and self-sufficiency—comprehensive support services, including shelter, counseling, and job training programs, must be provided to victims.

THE SHELTER

Through the Lao Women’s Union’s perseverance, the Lao government donated a plot of land for the construction of a state-of-the-art shelter in the capital city of Vientiane. In order to maintain a high level of protection for its occupants, the shelter, currently comprised of three buildings, is located in the outskirts of the city and is surrounded by a security wall. Transportation to the shelter is provided by the Lao Women’s Union.

To ensure an effective design for the shelter, The Asia Foundation organized an eight-day observation program for a delegation of nine Lao leaders to visit a series of shelters—government and non-governmental—in Thailand and Singapore. The delegation was comprised of community leaders, LWU representatives, women’s advocates, and government officials. This program included a strategic workshop for the participants to determine the types of services the LWU shelter might

provide to victims, based on their observations. The Foundation then arranged for the group to consult with a Thai architectural firm with expertise in constructing shelters and developed a master blueprint. Construction of the shelter commenced in 2005.

Through the assistance of Give2Asia, a charity founded by the Foundation to promote philanthropy to Asia, The Asia Foundation provided major support for the planning and construction of the shelter, including a five-bedroom building for women and girls who are victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking.

A second house for abandoned or homeless women and girls was constructed with support from UNICEF. The Japanese Embassy supported the construction of a multi-purpose building. Give2Asia and UNICEF also supported the construction of the security wall. In total, the shelter can house up to 50 women who have full access to an array of services provided by trained counselors and staff.

Currently, a fourth building, a vocational training center, is being planned with funds from the Foundation and Give2Asia. This training facility—both for shelter residents and at-risk women and girls—will offer women new job skills, such as handicrafts, sewing, and basic business management. These new skills will empower women to find work, support themselves, and establish their freedom from violence.

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