

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

## LAOS

The Asia Foundation re-established an office in Laos in 2009, enabling us to expand on our 20 year history of providing opportunities for Lao women to improve their lives. Managed by our office in Thailand before 2009, the new office and increased staff enables us to broaden the scope and impact of our programs and empower women to address the many challenges they face. Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the world—and women are among the poorest of the poor. Almost 30 percent of the population is illiterate and unemployment is high. Violence against women and trafficking of women and girls are serious problems.

Since the 1990s, The Asia Foundation has partnered with the Lao Women's Union to protect women under the law and in practice. We have helped to bring women into public life, so that their priorities can be reflected in public decisionmaking. Together, we have achieved several important "firsts" in the country including establishing the first long-term shelter for victims of trafficking and domestic violence, and drafting and securing passage of the first comprehensive law that gives women legal protections to ensure their safety and equal rights.

### SECURING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In 2004, the Foundation and the Lao Women's Union (LWU) conducted the first-ever research survey on violence against women in Laos. The findings galvanized local and national support for anti-trafficking and domestic violence legislation, and resulted in the government passing the Development and Protection of Women Law. The Foundation also provided technical assistance to draft the law, a process which sought public input and resulted in the first public hearings ever held in Laos.



### INCREASING WOMEN'S SAFETY

Victims of domestic violence and human trafficking are often stigmatized by their communities and have few options for shelter or access to other social services. In order to assist these victims to reintegrate into their communities, the Foundation supported the construction of Laos' very first women's shelter, the Counseling and Protection Center for Women and Children (CPCWC). Completed in 2006, CPCWC offers a range of counseling services and vocational training in areas such as handicraft production, sewing, and basic business management, empowering women to rebuild their lives. The Foundation continues to support this center today.

### IMPROVING CARE FOR VICTIMS

To ensure victims of domestic violence, human trafficking, and other forms of abuse receive adequate assistance, the Foundation and the LWU held a series of training workshops to build a network between counselors, lawyers, medical providers, and local authorities. This network streamlines timely and comprehensive care for these victims, and works as a team to build successful legal cases against perpetrators. For

example, a doctor who participated in the training contacted CPCWC when an abused girl was brought to him for treatment. CPCWC worked with police, female lawyers, and counselors to provide the girl with legal and medical support, and counseling. This coordinated response and support system enabled the girl to safely testify in court against her abuser, who was ultimately found guilty.

#### **SUPPORTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The Foundation works with the LWU to increase women's representation in public office, position women's priorities on policy agendas, and hold the government accountable for the protection of women's rights. Foundation programs have trained women leaders at both the national and local levels on issues including women's constitutional rights, gender equality and discrimination, public speaking, and

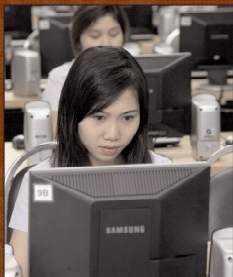
presentation skills. These trainings have been attended by women from throughout the country and have given them the confidence and leadership skills to be effective advocates for women.

#### **RAISING AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES**

In spite of some important progress, many victims of domestic violence and human trafficking were unaware of both their rights and where they could find shelter and support. In 2008, the Foundation and the LWU launched a radio campaign, in three different languages, to raise public awareness of women's rights under the new law and highlight public services for victims. This radio campaign directly resulted in victims seeking assistance from the Foundation-supported shelter.

### **PARTNER HIGHLIGHT:**

#### **LAO WOMEN'S UNION**



Since its establishment in 1955, the Lao Women's Union has worked steadily to enhance the role and status of Lao women, promote gender equality in all areas of development, and protect the rights of women. With branch offices operating at the national, provincial, and village levels across the country, the LWU is recognized as the national leader for women's issues in Laos, and has been an important partner for the Foundation's work in support of women in Laos since 1989.

#### **OUR DONORS MAKE OUR PROGRAMS POSSIBLE**

With contributions from private individuals, corporations, foundations, and public funders, we are able to create exciting new models and expand successful programs that are making a significant difference in the lives of girls and women across the Asia-Pacific region. To support our programs, please visit the Women's Empowerment Program page at: [www.asiafoundation.org](http://www.asiafoundation.org).

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization working to advance mutual interests of the United States and the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.



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