Women’s Empowerment Program in Laos

For over two decades, The Asia Foundation has worked with local partners in Laos to ensure women’s ability to access their legal rights, increase their presence in leadership roles, and provide greater opportunities for women and girls to improve their lives.

EDUCATION FOR GIRLS

In many families and particularly in rural areas, girls’ education often comes secondary to expectations that they should care for younger siblings and assist with household chores. Within the Lao Constitution girls and boys have equal rights to access education, but economic hardship, a major cause of school dropouts in Laos, disproportionately affects girls’ ability to stay in school.

The Asia Foundation is providing full scholarships for 50 young women from poor and low-income families to pursue a four-year university degree at the National University of Laos in Vientiane. Many of the scholars are from minority ethnic groups and are from home towns far away from a university campus. These students are majoring in a range of disciplines including social sciences, hard sciences, and foreign languages. In addition to tuition, the scholarship covers other vital expenses, such as books, lodging, and uniforms.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

In some instances, women can be reluctant to seek legal assistance, especially when the authorities are men. To overcome this barrier, it is important that both men and women serve in roles that help citizens access the justice system, and that both men and women are trained on gender-related crime such as violence against women and human trafficking.

The Asia Foundation is helping the Lao Bar Association to educate citizens on the law, their rights, the legal system, and the role of lawyers by training volunteers to become paralegal resource people within their own communities. In addition to general trainings, specialized workshops have been held to train women paralegals to serve this role in their community usually reserved for men. Furthermore, all training workshops—for men and women—are designed to include specific sessions on domestic violence, trafficking in persons, and gender-related crimes.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

In collaboration with the Lao Women’s Union, The Asia Foundation conducted a survey that aimed to identify high-risk areas for trafficking in persons in Vientiane and determine risk factors related to places of employment and workers themselves. The survey found that the most compelling reason to travel to Vientiane or further is to seek income to support their families. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of women surveyed had no vocational skills, which puts them at a significant disadvantage when seeking legitimate employment opportunities, thereby increasing their susceptibility to informal work and to trafficking.

Over 300 Community Security Officers from three provinces have been trained on human trafficking and domestic violence.

The Foundation supports the Gender Development Association to train women in leadership roles.
In response, The Asia Foundation is working to help at-risk and trafficked women and girls succeed in the local labor market through providing access to vocational training programs. This support allows these women to take part in a hands-on four-to-six month training course in cooking, hairdressing, or tailoring while they also receive counseling and other support. Upon graduation, social workers assess each student, provide her with the necessary “tool kit” to start her career, and assist in locating a suitable employer or providing assistance to start up her own business.

COMMUNITY SECURITY OFFICERS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Awareness and understanding of human trafficking is low in Laos, even among those in the security field. The Lao Women’s Union in cooperation with the National Committee on Anti-Human Trafficking, with Asia Foundation support, has worked to address the issue through trainings and awareness-raising. For instance, radio and television spots were produced and broadcast nationwide to educate the public on the realities of trafficking. They include information on how to prevent being trafficked, and where to go for help. Informational pamphlets and stickers to publicize a national telephone helpline and other sources of assistance were also produced and disseminated at events and festivals. More than 300 Community Security Officers from three provinces have been trained on human trafficking and what to do should they come across suspicious circumstances. After completing these human trafficking workshops, participants repeatedly expressed that this was the first time they had received this type of training, and how they had seen many of these behaviors in their villages but previously had not been able to identify them as a potential trafficking-related crime and did not realize that Laos has laws to protect trafficking victims.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR WOMEN

In Laos, decision-making and leadership positions are often viewed as men’s roles. Recognizing the importance of women in civic participation, The Asia Foundation supports skills development for women from a wide variety of sectors. The Foundation supports the Gender Development Association to train district and village level authorities, villagers, and staff from local organizations to build the capacity of women in leadership roles. The Foundation also supports the Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women to build the skills of national-level government officials, and the Lao Businesswomen’s Association to train women entrepreneurs and business owners. Topics featured in the training sessions include organizational leadership skills; public speaking; and decision-making techniques. These are brand new skills for many participants, especially those from small villages.

SPOTLIGHT ON SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT, MS. SOUKSAMI

Ms. Souksam is from Lahman district of Xekong province in southern Laos. She has a large family of nine—five sisters and one brother. Her father is a soldier and their family supplements his income by growing a small patch of vegetables. They reside in a rural village far from the closest market and it is difficult to sell their produce. Despite being a serious and enthusiastic student in school, her family had no way to support her going to university and living away from home. In 2011, Ms. Souksam received an Asia Foundation-supported scholarship to attend the National University of Laos. Ms. Souksam said, “When I first came to Vientiane I was scared as everything was new for me—new life, new environment, and new friends from different places.” But she is adapting well to this new life in an urban city and studies English-language at the National University of Laos. She enjoys reading and aspires to become a teacher and serve her country. “This is just a great opportunity for me. There is no way I could have attended university without this scholarship.”