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Perceptions and Attitudes of Young People on Issues Related to Violence Against Women and Girls in Lao PDR

SUMMARY FINDINGS

UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific



Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAW/G) is one of the most pervasive and systemic human rights violations in the world. In Asia and the Pacific, as around the world, VAW/G affects women and girls in every country, regardless of context, with serious repercussions for themselves, their families, and their societies. In Lao PDR, VAW/G is a persistent, yet often overlooked, form of discrimination. It is only in the last several years that policymakers and advocates have made headway in facilitating open discussions around the existence of violence, and have begun leveraging real policy such change to address the issue.



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Violence Against Women and Girls in Lao PDR

While progress has been made, including a legislative review of the provisions related to VAW/G in the country, ongoing research, and a growing number of awareness-raising campaigns, prevalence and acceptance of such violence remain high. Laws are not often implemented to their fullest extent and the issue remains taboo, making the report of incidents rare and access to justice and support for survivors challenging. Now is a critical time to continue fostering discussions on VAW/G, working to grow the body of knowledge on the issue, and design and implement clear strategies to ensure that all women and girls in Lao PDR can live free of violence and discrimination.

There is no current available data on the prevalence of VAW/G in Lao PDR, but anecdotal evidence supports the assumption of a society where such violence does occur and is often accepted as normal, or remains hidden. Prior research also reveals entrenched gender roles at all levels of the community, a general lack of understanding about what qualifies as “violence,” and a resistance to addressing the issue openly in almost any forum. In 2009, a CEDAW review committee reported a high incidence of violence against women in the country and noted the low priority of the issue for the government, including a dearth of relevant data.

Turning the Tide: Building Momentum to Address Violence against Women and Girls

Thanks to the work of community-based groups, advocates, and key government actors including national women's machineries, the issue of VAW/G in Lao PDR has risen to the forefront of the political agenda in recent years. The government has increasingly become an ally in mobilizing efforts to address and stem such violence, taking a leadership role in ensuring data collection and drafting stronger laws and policies.

Gender equality in Lao PDR is guaranteed under the 1991 Constitution and through the 2006 Law on Women's Development and Protection, and the 1992 Penal Law criminalizes rape (though not in marriage). In 2003, the National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW) was established by the Prime Minister's decree, and in August 2012 the second Five-Year National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (2011–2015) was launched. Policymakers are currently drafting the country's first violence against women law, to be passed in 2014, and plans for the country's first national prevalence study on VAW/G are also underway.

Documenting Violence against Women and Girls in Lao PDR

It is only possible to address VAW/G where it is acknowledged as existent and problematic. Documenting the prevalence and nature of such violence is crucial to generating momentum and effective strategies to address the issue. Current data on VAW/G in Lao PDR is varied, with some significant gaps. Because such violence is inextricably linked to power dynamics between genders, and beliefs about both violence and gender roles form early in life, more research on attitudes towards and perceptions of VAW/G is needed.

Until this study led by UN Women under the framework of the UNiTE Campaign, there was no available information on young people's experience of and attitudes toward violence against women and girls in Lao PDR. Young people are often left out of discussions about social issues, yet such issues shape their realities. They grow up to be lawyers, policymakers, and journalists, and perhaps survivors and perpetrators. Thus it is crucial to engage young people in all efforts to address VAW/G, starting with understanding their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes.

Study Overview

This study was an 'action-oriented research' undertaking. It was an effort to break new ground in understanding VAW/G in Lao PDR through the eyes of youth, including its complex root causes, its manifestation, and insights into how it can most effectively be stemmed. The study was conducted in 2012 by the Coram Children's Legal Centre in partnership with the Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports, as commissioned and overseen by UN Women and with generous support from AusAID. The intention of this study was not only to contribute to existing knowledge on VAW/G, but to leverage findings to inform more effective and strategic efforts to address VAW/G at the national, school, and community levels.

Objectives

- Examine the attitudes, perceptions, knowledge and practices of young men and women ages 15–18 relating to gender roles and VAW/G;
- Understand how gender roles and power relations at the individual, relationship, family and community levels are connected to young people's attitudes and experiences of various forms of violence;
- Strengthen the commitment of national policymakers and other key stakeholders to address issues of VAW/G through primary prevention programmes; and
- Recommend effective and appropriate policy and programme interventions for primary prevention based on research findings.

Methodology

- 685 semi-structured interviews (91 individual interviews and focus group discussions with 574 participants) were conducted.
- Interviews took place in rural and urban areas, in schools and out of schools, in Vientiane capital and in Champasak and Khammouane provinces.
- The methodology was designed to maximize participation of young people and researchers adhered to strict ethical guidelines in its implementation.

Limitations

This study is qualitative and relies on a relatively small sample size, which did not allow researchers to draw wide-reaching conclusions regarding the attitudes and perceptions of all young people in Lao PDR. While an attempt was made to take a representative sample from the population of young people ages 15–18, this sample was not scientifically selected. Schools pre-selected students for participation in the study, so random selection could not be guaranteed. Finally, relatively few young people from ethnic and religious minorities participated. As such, rather than being viewed as representative of all young people in Lao PDR, the findings should be taken as evidence of the importance of engaging youth on issues of VAW/G, and as a starting point for further discussions and research.



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Summary Key Findings

Young people have a keen awareness of their communities and an interest in discussing issues relating to gender and VAW/G, even though understanding of such issues is oftentimes low and these are difficult subjects to broach. Young people's attitudes towards such violence are complex and have been influenced by their own personal experiences and observations, as well as by values and norms that have been taught to them. It is clear that their understandings of gender roles and identities are lived as much as learned.

This study demonstrates that the attitudes and perceptions of young people regarding gender roles and relationships are inextricably linked to their acceptance of and views on VAW/G. The perceptions expressed reflect an environment which is heavily gender inequitable and in which several forms of violence against women and girls, including intimate partner sexual violence, are often accepted as inevitable. Men and women are ascribed defined gender roles, and the transgression of these roles is often used to justify violence. Yet because VAW/G is viewed largely as a private matter, and due to a lack of current protection and reporting mechanisms in the country, it persists too often unnoticed and unpunished.

Perceptions and Knowledge of Gender Roles

Participants had a limited understanding of the nuances of gender relations, in part because such topics are not often discussed.

While many respondents agreed that men and women are equal in theory and under the law, 60% of interviewees reported that there was inequality between men and women in reality, at the community level.

- More than three-quarters of rural-dwelling respondents believed there was inequality between men and women at the community level, while approximately half of urban-dwelling respondents did.

There was acknowledgement among participants of more than two-'male' and 'female'-genders identities.

- In two urban setting schools, approximately 33% of students stated that 'transsexuals' accounted for about 10% of the school population.

The majority of young people identified stringent and binary gender roles for 'male' and 'female,' which were linked with specific values and behaviors.

- In general, women are expected to be obedient, supportive, and sexually submissive.
- Men are generally seen as dominant, leaders, decision-makers, and may have the right to control women with whom they are in a relationship.

“Men cut the trees, cut the grass in the village and build fences. Women do the cooking and washing. Men are the leaders of the community and women have a ‘lower position’ than men.”

– Girl, 16 years, Khammouane Province

“They are equal but have different work to do. Women do household work, while men do hard work.”

– Boy, 16 years, Champasak Province

A woman's deviation from her gender role is generally accepted only if that means the expression of positive attributes, most often linked with masculinity, such as leadership. Deviation otherwise and which results in negative consequences is blamed on the woman.

- For example, a prominent female politician garnered respect from respondents in one scenario, while a woman who deviated by using alcohol or experiencing sexual violence was blamed.

Distinct gender roles pervade all areas of life, including the family, schools, and the community at large. While some role division may seem benign, such as school chores requiring boys to plant vegetables and girls to tidy classrooms, over time these stringent gender roles may facilitate perceptions and attitudes among young people that may serve to legitimise VAW/G.

Participants revealed a tendency to value collective rights, or societal norms, over individual rights, and had little understanding of the concept of "human rights."

“ If she is a good woman, she should dress properly and not drink. ”

– Girl, 17 years, Champasak Province

“ The husband has a right to be angry with someone who tries to intervene. It might be the woman who is wrong and nobody knows the truth. Violence is a private issue. ”

– Girl, 15 years, Champasak Province

Perceptions and Knowledge of Violence Against Women and Girls

Fewer than half of participants reported knowledge of VAW/G in their communities, yet all acknowledged witnessing or experiencing some form of violence in their community.

Forty-six percent of participants indicated that they had been threatened or made to feel uncomfortable at school. Of these, the vast majority had not reported these incidents.

- Those respondents who reported experiencing unwanted or threatening advances were more likely to agree that a woman could refuse sex with her husband.

Violence, particularly intimate partner violence, is viewed as a taboo issue. Many respondents believed that violence within relationships was a private matter, never to be intervened with.

- Several young people responded that VAW/G was wrong when perpetrated in public because it violated the social norm to keep such matters private.

Sexual violence is often times not immediately identified or discussed as an issue within relationships because sex may be seen as part of the "duty" of a relationship.

- Fewer than 10% of respondents agreed that a man could force his wife to have sex, but many also responded that a woman should refuse only if she has a "good reason."

The incidence of VAW/G was oftentimes accepted, or even anticipated, as a justifiable consequence when gender roles and responsibilities were transgressed. In most cases where individuals stray from clearly defined gender roles, young people assign blame for the negative consequences onto the victim.

- Most respondents agreed it was wrong for a man to rape a woman who was intoxicated and dressed in revealing clothes, but only because they were not in a relationship. Most also expressed the belief that they thought the woman was at least partly to blame.

While many respondents said they were opposed to all forms of VAW/G, nearly 20% of individual interviewees suggested that it would, in some circumstances, be acceptable for a man to hit his wife.

Most respondents agreed that it was acceptable for a woman to leave an abusive husband, but only because the man was not "acting as he should." (i.e. upholding the responsibilities assigned to him by his gender)

“ Regarding sexual violence within a relationship: the husband infringed on her human rights. **”**

– Boy, 18 years, Champasak Province



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“ It is the right of the husband but he should respect his wife. He has the right to have sex with her but he has to be careful. He should not use violence. **”**

– Boy, 18 years, Champasak Province

“ He has no right to [force himself on her sexually] because he is not her husband or boyfriend. **”**

– Girl, 15 years, Champasak Province

Analysis and Conclusion

Findings from this study depict a patriarchal landscape in which there are few effective drivers towards gender equality. Many young people recognize the equality of men and women in theory, and even according to law, but identify and perpetuate inequality in practice. Patriarchal gender roles, hegemonic masculinities and socially valued gender identities expressed among respondents are reflected in VAW/G throughout the society, as they foster the sense the women are subordinate to men, and that a ‘good’ man exerts his power, including potentially through violence.

Yet findings also demonstrate an interest and willingness among young people to discuss and address issues of VAW/G, and suggest that they can be key partners in doing so. Many young respondents also articulated a clear understanding and support of human rights and gender equity.

It is possible to raise awareness among young people of VAW/G in a sensitive manner, and it is important to do so in order to prevent the problem from persisting. Greater awareness around VAW/G should be accompanied by information for youth about where and how to access resources when VAW/G is identified. Further, greater efforts should be made to involve young people in the processes of legal and policy reform regarding VAW/G. Young people have the potential to be powerful allies, advocates, and partners for change.

“ It is partly her fault – maybe the guy is drunk so he can’t control himself. **”**

– Boys’ Focus Group Discussion in Champasak Province

Looking Ahead: Key Recommendations

Concrete and specific recommendations for actors at the school, community, and national level were devised based on research findings. Recommendations include:

At the national level:

- **Strengthen commitment of policymakers to address issues of VAW/G** through the legal and policy framework, including wide dissemination of study findings and the implementation of additional research on VAW/G in Lao PDR.
- **Continue legislative review and revision process relating to VAW/G** to ensure that all forms of such violence are defined and addressed under the law, including within marriage.
- **Continue strengthening the national child protection system, including** training for front line workers and stakeholders at all levels on implementation.
- **Develop a comprehensive curriculum** relating to gender roles, rights and equality for schools and community learning centres, including guidance on mandatory equality of roles within these settings and guidance for teachers on implementation.
- **Identify select teachers and community educators** to be key leaders and trainers responsible for the implementation of this curriculum, and designate a child protection officer in each school and district education office.

At the community level:

- **Implement a comprehensive, rights-based curriculum on gender roles, rights and equality** in community learning centers to encourage increased awareness and reporting of VAW/G, including the development of posters and leaflets to specifically engage youth (potentially developed by youth themselves).
- **Ensure access to counselling services, safe houses, and special hotlines**, including resources in multiple languages and for individuals of all ages, to strengthen community response to survivors of VAW/G.
- **Raise awareness about current VAW/G-related laws and policies** to encourage greater reporting and adherence to the law at all levels of the community.
- **Engage community leaders** to help raise awareness of VAW/G, including implementation of targeted campaigns on drug- and alcohol use and violence at festivals and national celebrations.

At the school level:

- **Implement a comprehensive, rights-based curriculum on gender roles, rights and equality** in schools, including guidance and training for teachers and the development of posters and leaflets to specifically engage youth (potentially developed by youth themselves).
- **Designate key point people in schools and district education offices** to ensure implementation of gender and rights curriculum, as well as child protection system.
- **Cease practice of gender-specific roles in the classroom** (girls tidying while boys plant vegetables), and instead ensure gender-neutral tasks and adequate leadership opportunities for girls in addition to boys.



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