

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 151

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Enquirer	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Introduction

The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has requested the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk to develop a Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Factsheet in Lao PDR, with a specific focus on waste management and agriculture sectors. This will inform the work plan for the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Environmental Pollution Programme, alongside DEFRA's internal decisions for the next few years. The factsheet seeks to answer the following research questions:

- > Who are the most marginalised, vulnerable, or socially excluded people and groups in Laos' urban and rural areas, and what are the key drivers of inequalities—including within the waste management and agricultural sectors? How do intersecting identities and forms of discrimination intensify their exclusion and disadvantage?
- > How are these excluded groups affected by the adverse health and environmental impacts of air, waste, and chemical pollution in Laos' urban and rural communities, and what are the implications of this exclusion on their well-being and livelihoods?
- > What are the risks, including safeguarding and SEAH risks, to working with these groups or addressing drivers of inequalities? How are these risks best mitigated?

Marginalisation and social exclusion – country level

Gender equality

Legislation and women's political participation

- > **Lao PDR has an established legal and policy framework to advance gender equality.** It ratified the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW) in 1981. The [2004 Law on the Development and Protection of Women](#) prohibits discrimination and outlines the state's responsibilities to promote women's rights, and the [2019 Law on Gender Equality](#) further strengthens the legal basis for equal rights, obligations, and opportunities for women and men. In addition, the [Fourth National Plan of Action on Gender Equality \(2021–2025\)](#) builds on earlier national plans and sets targets for women's participation, protection, and economic empowerment. The [9th National Socio-Economic](#)

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[Development Plan \(NSEDP 2021–2025\)](#) mainstreams gender equality and women's empowerment across all six outcomes.

- **According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*, Lao PDR's political empowerment gap remains large.** Women hold 28.1% of parliamentary seats, 21.4% of ministerial posts, and the country has had no female head of state in the last five decades. These indicators contribute to a low overall political empowerment score of 0.140, placing Lao PDR at 108th globally ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 239).
- **The significant variance in the political positions that women occupy is reflective of broader social norms around gender roles.** Challenges include candidacy requirements for women, cultural attitudes favouring male leadership, limited training support, and family responsibilities that constrain political engagement ([UNDP Lao PDR, 2025](#)).

Economic opportunities and rights

- **According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*, Lao PDR has made incremental gains in economic participation and opportunity, though notable gender gaps persist.** In the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index, Lao PDR recorded a score of 0.721, ranking 56th globally in economic participation and opportunity. This marks an improvement from 0.714 and a rank of 61st in 2024, indicating gradual progress in narrowing gender gaps in the labour market ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 239).
- **Economic participation shows active involvement of women, but persistent gaps:** Women's labour force participation is 61.47%, compared with 70.76% for men, and women's estimated earned income (6,799 international dollars) remains below men's (9,940) ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 239).
- **Women's representation in different types of work remains uneven:** Women make up 47.11% of professional and technical workers but hold only 25.68% of senior leadership roles, whereas men account for 52.89% of technical roles and 74.32% of senior positions ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 239). Leadership advancement shows mixed progress, with advancement into leadership scored at 5.40 ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 240).
- **Women's presence in the private sector is strong but still unequal at the top:** Women own 49.50% of firms and serve as top managers in 43.10% of firms ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 240).
- **Employment patterns show both high informality and low unemployment:** women's informal employment stands at 91.60% compared with 89.47% for men, while unemployment remains low overall, at 0.92% for women and 1.57% for men ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 240).
- **Recent labour statistics highlight the persistence of vulnerable employment in Lao PDR.** Vulnerable employment among women is 81.5% and among men is 72.5% in the Lao PDR for 2023. The rate of vulnerable employment is higher for men and women in the Lao PDR compared to the average rate in East Asia & Pacific ([World Bank, 2025a](#)).
- **Work conditions and unpaid responsibilities reveal persistent gender differences:** 19.56% of women and 18.61% of men are employed part-time, and women spend 13.60% of their time on unpaid domestic and care work compared with 10.06% for men ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 240).
- **Legal frameworks in the Lao PDR provide women with formal protections to access and own land on an equal basis with men.** Women have near-equal legal rights to access and own land assets compared to men ([World Economic Forum](#), 2025, p. 240). According to Clause 4, Article 135 of the 2024 Land Law, when land use rights or property attached to land

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is jointly owned by a husband and wife, the names of both spouses must be recorded on the land certificate. If only one name is listed, a new certificate can be issued to include both, unless the property is individually owned, purchased with one party's separate funds, or the spouses have agreed that it should be registered under one name ([Huy, 2025](#)).

- **Women's digital access is approaching that of men in Lao PDR.** About 85.2% of women own a mobile phone compared to 83.6% of men, while 73.4% of women used the internet in the past 30 days, versus 67.0% of men. Smartphone ownership reveals that more women (72.4%) than men (66.2%) own smartphones ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- **Mobile money is a key driver of financial inclusion, especially for women.** Among adults with an account, 12.4% of women use both a bank and mobile money account, and 30.9% rely on a bank account only, compared to 10.5% and 20.7% of men, respectively ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- **Use of digital tools for learning and skills development remains limited for both sexes.** Only 24.3% of women and 26.2% of men reported accessing online information for learning, training, or education ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).

Gender-based violence (GBV)

- **Available data suggest that the prevalence of recent intimate partner violence among women in Lao PDR is broadly in line with regional averages.** 8.0% of ever-partnered women (ages 15–49) in Lao PDR experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the last 12 months (2018), similar to the East Asia & Pacific regional average (7.93%) but lower than the Lower Middle-Income country (LMC) average (16.9%) ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
 - According to a UNDP study, the findings reveal a significant level of gender-based violence among women. Sixteen percent of female participants reported experiencing some form of GBV, such as bullying or physical assault, with 8% experiencing it a few times and 3% many times. Additionally, 11% of women reported verbal violence, including being insulted by a partner in public ([Smee et al., 2022](#), p. 5).
 - In the Lao PDR, the share of women who have experienced intimate partner violence is less than the world average, 27% ([World Bank, 2025a](#)).
- **The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) reports that survivors of GBV in Lao PDR still face major justice barriers**—despite past CEDAW recommendations—including inappropriate use of alternative dispute resolution, harmful gender stereotypes in the justice system, inadequate protection from secondary victimisation, and insufficient funding and support services ([ICJ, 2024](#), p. 6).
- **There is limited data on technology-facilitated GBV in Lao PDR**, though reported cases exist. The [2nd National Plan of Action on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Violence against Children \(2021–2025\)](#) includes commitments to address online violence, including child sexual exploitation. Evidence shows a strong gendered pattern: women, young women, and adolescent girls are most likely to be targeted, with higher risks for women with disabilities, LGBT individuals, ethnic minorities, low-income and migrant women, and women in public-facing roles. Men can also be affected, particularly ethnic men and men with diverse sexual or gender identities or those who do not conform to expected gender norms ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2023](#), p. 1-2).

People with disabilities

Legislation, policy and context

- **Lao PDR has a supportive policy framework for disability inclusion**, having ratified the

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UNCRPD in 2009, adopted Law No. 57 on persons with disabilities in 2018, and established a national policy, strategy, and action plan for 2020–2030 to promote non-discrimination and improve access to education, health, and other services ([Scherer et al, 2026](#), p. 2).

- However, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has noted ongoing gaps, including limited legal prohibition of disability-based discrimination and insufficient strategies to prevent violence and abuse against people with disabilities ([Scherer et al, 2026](#), p. 2).
- > **Disability prevalence in Lao PDR reflects deep structural inequalities, with marked disparities across locations and ethnic groups.** An estimated 1.3 billion people—about 16% of the world's population—live with a significant disability. In Lao PDR, the 2015 census reported a disability prevalence of 2.77%. Still, a 2019 WHO survey found that 23% of adults experience a severe form of disability, indicating a far higher rate than global averages ([UNs Lao PDR, 2024](#)).
 - Disability prevalence is highest in the poorest areas, at 3.33% in rural areas without roads, 2.86% in rural areas with roads, and 2.48% in urban areas ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 7).
 - Prevalence is much higher among Mon-Khmer groups (3.51%) than among Lao-Tai (2.50%), Hmong-lewmien (2.79%), and Chinese-Tibetan (2.85%), all of which are lower than or close to the national average ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 7).
- > **Lao PDR records one of the highest levels of unmet need for personal assistance among adults with disabilities.** An estimated 72% of adults with disabilities report that they need personal assistance but do not receive it ([Cote and Banks, 2025](#), p. 142).
- > **According to the National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021–2025), unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains a critical priority, with hundreds of people in Lao PDR killed or disabled by UXO explosions each year.** The Plan aims to support 5,760 of the 9,607 UXO survivors with medical, psychological, and rehabilitation services, as well as vocational and employment training, while also raising awareness of disability rights to reduce stigma and strengthen support (cited in [ESCAP, 2025](#), p.16).

Education

- > **People with disabilities have significantly lower education levels**, with literacy at 52.92% compared with 86.02% in the general population; women with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged, with literacy at 40.04%, far below 89.91% for men without disabilities ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 8).
- > **Limited access to schooling drives these gaps:** 43.16% of children with disabilities never enrolled in primary school (vs. 9.6% of other children), enrolment drops by half between primary and secondary levels, and adults with disabilities are three times less likely to have completed vocational training than the rest of the population (3% vs. 9%) ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 8).
- > **Most schools remain inaccessible and lack the assistive or adaptive technologies needed to support children with disabilities.** Teachers are generally unable to identify disabilities, and there is no requirement for them to report such needs ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 19). Also, most teachers struggle to identify or support students with learning differences ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 18).
 - Additionally, according to the [Laos 2022 Human Rights Report](#), the nongovernmental Lao Disabled People's Association reported that many students with disabilities do not have

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access to appropriate educational resources.

Economic rights and opportunities

- > **People with disabilities have much lower employment outcomes**, with only 46.51% employed compared with 68.38% of those without disabilities, and higher unemployment (4.01% vs. 1.35%). Overall, labour force participation is also lower (70% vs. 81.6%) due to a higher share of individuals unable to work ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 8).
- > **Youth (aged 15 to 24) with disabilities are seven times more likely to be neither in employment, education, nor training than youth without disabilities** (27.8% vs. 4.3%). Women and those with physical, communication, or memory difficulties face especially high exclusion from the workforce ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 8).
- > **Persons with disabilities are more likely to live in the poorest households**, with 25.1% in the lowest wealth quintile compared with 22.4% of those without disabilities, and they are less represented in the wealthiest quintile (14% vs. 18.7%) ([UNFPA Lao PDR, 2020](#), p. 7-8).

Access to services and digital access

- > **People with disabilities face major barriers in accessing appropriate healthcare** due to limited services, shortages of specialists, and regional gaps in provision, with the system often failing to meet the needs of those with psychosocial or developmental disabilities ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 60-61).
 - **Women with disabilities have even less access to health services than men**, as most rehabilitation services are located at central or provincial levels, and women often face greater mobility constraints ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 21).
- > **Persons with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing legal aid, especially due to distance and the limited availability of services**. Existing mobile legal clinics are constrained by a shortage of trained lawyers and inadequate funding, with additional obstacles including the absence of sign language interpreters, a lack of transportation, and inaccessibility (e.g., stairs) ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 95). To date, Lao PDR's digital access data is not disaggregated by disability status.
- > **To date, digital access data in Lao PDR are not disaggregated by disability status**. While the Ministry of Technology and Communications has recently emphasised expanding Lao-language digital content through the development of compatible fonts and keyboards to advance national digital transformation, the availability and use of assistive technologies that enable the learning and participation of persons with disabilities remain largely unaddressed ([Joint Submission by UNDP on behalf of the UN country team](#)).

Exposure to violence

- > **Concerns regarding the invisibility of violence against women and girls with disabilities in Lao PDR have been formally raised at the international level**. The [Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) expressed concern about the lack of information and statistical data in the Lao PDR on violence against women and girls with disabilities, including data on complaints submitted by them.
- > **Survey-based research suggests that women with disabilities in Lao PDR face substantial exposure to gender-based violence**. According to the UNDP study, 40% of women with disabilities who participated reported experiencing gender-based violence ([Smeel et al., 2022](#), p.5).

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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Other Identities (LGBT+)

- **Same-sex relationships are not criminalised in Lao PDR, but there are no laws that protect LGBT+ people from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.** While Article 35 of the Constitution states that all citizens are equal before the law regardless of gender, social status, education, beliefs, or ethnicity, it does not explicitly cover LGBT+ based discrimination ([APCOM, 2020](#), p. 11).
 - Lao PDR lacks a comprehensive framework to protect LGBT+ women, and the absence of legal gender recognition for transgender and gender-diverse persons leaves a significant gap in protection ([ICJ, 2024](#), p.5).
 - Additionally, Article 151 of the Civil Code of Lao PDR, adopted in 2018, prohibits same-sex marriage ([APCOM, 2020](#), p. 11).
- **No official data is collected on the number of LGBT+ and intersex people in Lao PDR.** The legal system's binary recognition of sex and gender presents a significant barrier to inclusive data collection, making such efforts difficult in the absence of legal and policy reforms ([Basengkham and Dethkongxay, 2024](#), p. 30).
 - According to the World Bank, there is no reported data on gender-based violence affecting LGBT+ individuals in Lao PDR ([Hyun, 2020](#), p. 13).
- **LGBT+ individuals in Lao PDR continue to face multiple, interrelated challenges rooted in social norms, institutional practices, and gaps in protection**, as outlined below ([APCOM, 2020](#), p. 6).
 - LGBT+ individuals are often not recognised as rights holders with aspirations, potential, and agency, largely due to entrenched traditional societal and family structures.
 - Persistent stigma, discrimination, and misunderstanding of LGBT+ identities remain widespread in society, with lesbians facing particularly pronounced prejudice.
 - LGBT+ individuals experience discrimination in schools and educational institutions, in the workplace from colleagues and employers, and within health-care facilities.
 - There is a lack of accessible, safe, and effective mechanisms to report violence and discrimination, limiting access to justice and redress.
- **Lao PDR has seen growing awareness of gender diversity and sexual orientation, reflecting some progress in legal gender recognition.** However, legal recognition remains limited to male and female genders, and individuals are not permitted to change their legal gender, even when it differs from their gender identity, limiting the full inclusion of LGBT+ people ([Basengkham and Dethkongxay, 2024](#), p. 19).
 - The Ministry of Education and Sports and UNFPA have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to revise Comprehensive Sexuality Education across lower and upper secondary education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) ([APCOM, 2020](#), p. 5).

Ethnic Minorities

- **The situation of Indigenous Peoples in Lao PDR is shaped by a restrictive civic space and the absence of a dedicated legal framework recognising Indigenous rights.** Lao PDR has ratified key international human rights treaties, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), CEDAW, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, fundamental freedoms such as expression, association, assembly, and religion remain tightly restricted, and civil society operates under close government control. As a result, organisations explicitly focusing

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on Indigenous Peoples are not permitted, and public discussion of Indigenous issues remains sensitive ([IWGIA, 2025](#), p. 243-244).

- Lao PDR does not yet have a clear legal or regulatory framework on Indigenous Peoples. To address this gap, the Department of Ethnic Affairs under the Ministry of Home Affairs has drafted a Decree on Ethnic Affairs, which is currently under government revision ([IFAD and IWGIA, 2022](#), p. 30).

> **Ethnic minorities in the Lao PDR are significantly more likely to live in poverty.** The 2021 UNDP Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) confirms that ethnic minority groups in Lao PDR experience higher levels of poverty than the Lao-Tai majority. The Lao-Tai have an MPI value of 0.048, while the Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan, and Hmong-Mien groups each have MPI values of 0.190 or higher ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 30).

> **Persistent disparities across ethnic groups in Lao PDR reflect intersecting challenges related to geography, gender norms, and service access.** While Lao PDR is ethnically diverse, non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups are more likely to live in remote and upland areas where access to education and basic services is limited. Efforts to address ethnic inequalities remain limited, and there are few government-registered civil society organisations or non-profit associations focused specifically on the needs of minority ethnic groups ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 27).

- Gender norms continue to constrain educational opportunities for both girls and boys, contributing to unequal learning outcomes and higher dropout rates, particularly among girls in ethnic minority areas ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 19).
- LSIS-II data shows significant literacy gaps across ethnic groups, with Lao-Tai adults having the highest literacy rates (84% for men and 76% for women), while Sino-Tibetan groups have the lowest (50% for men and 35% for women). Literacy rates are also comparatively low among Mon-Khmer and Hmong-Mien populations, particularly for women ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 41).
- Access to quality health services remains limited in remote areas, with ethnic minority communities disproportionately affected by inadequate facilities and service coverage ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 20). Further, women from ethnic communities feel uncomfortable seeking health care if the providers do not speak their language ([Britt et al., 2022](#), p. 57).

> **Evidence submitted to United Nations mechanisms points to ongoing and grave human rights abuses against Hmong communities in Lao PDR, with women and children facing heightened vulnerability.** In 2025, UNPO, Congress of the World Hmong People (CWHP), and Boat People SOS (BPSOS) reported to UN bodies that Hmong communities in Lao PDR continue to face severe human rights violations—including military attacks, forced displacement, arrests, disappearances, killings, and gender-based violence—amid systemic discrimination, loss of land, and restrictions on cultural and economic rights, with recent crackdowns resulting in hundreds of detentions, dozens of deaths, and humanitarian blockades affecting women and children ([UNPO, 2025](#)).

- Hmong ChaoFa women face extreme vulnerability, whether in the jungle or in military-controlled camps. Those searching for food risk injury, harsh conditions, encounters with illicit activity, and targeted killings by the military. In controlled villages, women face slavery-like treatment, torture, rape by security forces, and separation from their families, with many trafficked or forced into marriage. Severe living conditions also contribute to high maternal mortality in Xaisomboun Province ([UNPO, n.d.](#), p. 3).

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- > **Elderly care in Lao PDR remains largely family- and community-based, with formal state support still developing.** Elderly care in Lao PDR is traditionally grounded in family and community support. While the Government has established a legal framework through the Decree on Older Persons (2004, revised in 2021) and is finalising a 10-year National Strategy and Action Plan for Older Persons (2026–2035), significant gaps in legislation, data, and resources continue to limit effective implementation ([ESCAP, 2025](#), p. 15).
 - Several other challenges remain, including the absence of comprehensive legislation on older persons and limited data on the older population, particularly on health conditions, disease prevalence, poverty, and vulnerabilities ([Bodhisane and Pongpanich, 2023](#)).
- > **At the subnational level, initiatives supporting older persons remain limited**, including in urban areas. There is a shortage of age-friendly facilities, social programmes, and trained social workers to provide specialised care, constraining support for older persons who need assistance ([ESCAP, 2025](#), p. 15).

Children and young people

- > **Lao PDR's demographic profile is characterised by a large youth population.** Nearly one third of the population is aged 10–24, making Lao PDR one of the youngest countries in Southeast Asia. A high working-age to dependent population ratio in the coming years presents an opportunity to harness the demographic dividend and further improve living conditions ([UNDP Lao PDR, 2022](#), p. 6).
- > **Access to education and pathways into employment for young people in Lao PDR remain uneven, particularly for young women and rural youth.** In 2022, 24.6% of young women and 20.4% of young men were not in education, employment, or training, with higher disengagement among young women. ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
 - According to [LSIS 2023](#), nearly three in ten children of lower secondary school age (29%) are out of school, rising to six in ten at the upper secondary level. School completion rates at primary, lower, and upper secondary levels are consistently higher among children in urban areas and from the richest households compared to those in rural areas and the poorest households.
 - In 2024, youth unemployment rates were 2.12% for young women and 2.37% for young men (ages 15–24), lower than regional and global averages but masking broader challenges related to job quality and vulnerability ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- > **Early marriage remains a significant issue affecting young women in Lao PDR.** According to [LSIS 2023](#), three in ten women aged 20–24 were married before age 18, with rates more than twice as high in rural areas (36%) compared to urban areas (17%).
- > **Adolescent fertility rates in Lao PDR continue to exceed regional averages.** In 2023, the adolescent fertility rate stood at 81.7 births per 1,000 women aged 15–19, remaining higher than the East Asia and Pacific average (14.6) and the global average (39.1). ([World Bank, 2025b](#)).
- > **Nutritional outcomes among young children in Lao PDR continue to reflect multiple forms of malnutrition.** According to [LSIS 2023](#), in Lao PDR, 33% of children under five are stunted, 11% are wasted, and 24.3% are underweight, while 2.8% are overweight.
- > **Violence against children remains widespread in Lao PDR, particularly within the home.** Nearly one in three children aged 1–14 years' experience physical punishment, while nearly two in three children are subjected to psychological aggression. More than 60% of children experience at least one form of violent discipline at home ([The 2023 Lao Social Indicator Survey \(LSIS III\)](#)).

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- **Youth participation in formal political institutions in Lao PDR remains limited.** In Lao PDR, youth remain underrepresented in formal political structures despite having the right to vote and stand for office. Youth under the age of 45 account for only 12.2% of National Assembly members (20 out of 164), and the youngest provincial-level parliamentarian is 33 years old, reflecting broader global trends of low youth representation in legislative bodies ([UNDP Lao PDR, 2022](#), p. 155).

Urban versus rural

- **Significant rural–urban disparities persist in labour force participation in Lao PDR, with particularly low participation among rural women.** Labour force participation is higher in urban areas (55%) than in rural areas (43%), with the gap evident for both men and women, particularly rural women (37.7%) compared to urban women (49.6%) ([UNDP and UNFPA, 2023](#), p 56).
- **Employment in agriculture is overwhelmingly rural**, accounting for 71.9% of rural employment compared to 34.4% in urban areas, underscoring the continued reliance on agriculture-based livelihoods in rural Lao PDR ([UNDP and UNFPA, 2023](#), p 56).
- **Urban employment is concentrated in industry and services**, which together account for 65.6% of urban jobs (12.8% in industry and 52.8% in services), compared to only 28.1% in rural areas (8.4% industry and 19.7% services), highlighting limited diversification of rural employment ([UNDP and UNFPA, 2023](#), p 56).
- **Wage gaps are evident within sectors**, including agriculture, industry, and services, with women consistently earning less than men in both urban and rural contexts, reflecting occupational segregation and differences in job quality ([UNDP and UNFPA, 2023](#), p 56).
- **Water and sanitation outcomes in Lao PDR continue to reflect significant inequalities linked to location and poverty.** According to [LSIS 2023](#), in urban areas, 98% of households use basic drinking water sources, with nearly 90% having water on premises and 44% enjoying safely managed drinking water. In contrast, only 17% of the rural population has access to safely managed drinking water.
 - Use of unimproved sanitation and open defecation is significantly higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Half of the poorest households practice open defecation, highlighting persistent sanitation inequalities linked to poverty and location.

Impacts of pollution on marginalised and excluded groups

- **Climate governance in Lao PDR remains insufficiently gender-responsive and inclusive.** Climate policies and frameworks largely lack gender-responsive targets, while social and gender policies address environmental issues mainly through livelihoods and economic impacts. Women, gender-diverse people, and ethnic minorities are underrepresented as decision-makers and agents of change, and climate concerns are often addressed alongside broader environmental challenges such as deforestation, agricultural expansion, and biodiversity loss ([Vivona et. al., 2024](#), p. 4).
- **Pollution presents significant environmental and health risks in Lao PDR, driven by air pollution** from the use of firewood and charcoal, slash-and-burn agriculture, and waste burning, as well as land and water pollution resulting from poor waste management, the use of agrochemicals, and industrial activities, particularly mining. Inadequate sewerage systems and open defecation further exacerbate these risks ([Government of the Lao PDR, 2024](#), p. 125).
 - PM2.5 concentrations in Lao PDR are approximately 5.9 times higher than the WHO annual air quality guideline. According to the 2024 WHO Ambient Air Quality Database,

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estimated PM2.5 levels in 2022 reached about 25.76 µg/m³. Air pollution is driven by multiple sources, including urban and industrial activities, vehicle emissions, forest fires, and agricultural burning ([Government of the Lao PDR, 2024](#), p. 61).

- Air pollution, both indoors and outdoors, disproportionately affects households that rely on solid fuels for cooking, which account for 93% of households in Lao PDR. This exposure is linked to an estimated 7,000 premature deaths annually from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Low-income households and vulnerable groups, particularly women who spend more time indoors and are primarily responsible for cooking, bear the greatest burden ([Government of the Lao PDR, 2024](#), p. 61).
- > **Nearly all deaths linked to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) occur among children under five**, who also account for around 75% of the total costs associated with lead exposure, reflecting its disproportionate impact on young children ([Government of the Lao PDR, 2024](#), p. 61).
- Access to basic water services increased from 69% in 2011 to 78% in 2017, but major disparities remain. Six in seven households consume water contaminated with faeces, and access among the poorest households has barely improved. Basic sanitation coverage rose from 57% to 71% between 2012 and 2017, while open defecation declined from 38% to 24% ([Asia and the Pacific – Finance Ministers' meeting, 2020](#), p. 3).
- > **Nearly a quarter of urban waste in Lao PDR is plastic, much of it from single-use items** that pollute waterways, block drains, harm fisheries and tourism, and contribute to air pollution when burned. A small number of single-use plastic products account for most plastic pollution, with food and drink packaging and the hospitality and tourism sectors as major sources. Environmental health risks linked to pollution contribute to around 10,000 deaths annually, nearly half of which are associated with air pollution ([World Bank, 2022](#)).
- > **Children, older persons, and people with chronic illnesses are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of poor solid waste management** due to their heightened sensitivity to hazardous substances. Those with frequent exposure, including waste workers and communities living near open dumping or waste-burning sites, also face elevated health risks ([WHO, 2024](#)).

Marginalisation and social exclusion in the agriculture sector

Women

- > **Agriculture in Lao PDR is governed by a range of laws and policies**, led by the [Land Law \(2019\)](#), which places land ownership with the national community and provides long-term land use rights through a state-managed allocation system. [The Law on Resettlement and Vocation \(2018\)](#) regulates planned resettlement, including in high-risk areas relevant to climate and disaster resilience. Additional frameworks shaping the sector include [the Law on Agriculture \(1998\)](#), [the Law on Forestry \(2007\) \(amended in 2021\)](#), and national strategies such as [the National Agro-Biodiversity Programme and Action Plan \(2015–2025\)](#), alongside agriculture and forestry development strategies, several of which are under revision ([ADB, 2022](#), p. 25).
- **Overall, agriculture-related laws and policies in Lao PDR are largely gender-neutral**, with most frameworks referring to “farmers,” “households,” or “individuals” without explicitly addressing gender differences or incorporating principles of equality and non-discrimination. While the National Agro-Biodiversity Programme acknowledges distinct roles of women and men, gender considerations are not systematically integrated across the legal and policy framework ([ADB, 2022](#), p. 26).

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- Recognising the importance of women's participation in agriculture, forestry, and rural development, the Government of Lao PDR adopted the Vision to 2030 and the Gender Equality Strategy and Implementation Project for the Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development Sector (2016–2025) in February 2017. The strategy is currently under review as part of the broader review of the [Agriculture Development Strategy \(2016–2025\)](#) ([National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children, 2024](#), p. 55).
- > **Women play a significant role across all stages of agricultural production in Lao PDR, yet gendered household roles shape unequal decision-making power.** While rural gender norms reflect a “loose patriarchy,” with relatively higher female mobility and labour participation, men typically serve as household heads and primary decision-makers in agriculture. Women often have greater responsibility for saving income but have limited influence over spending decisions, although evidence suggests that commercial agriculture can shift gender roles and improve women's socio-economic status ([Moglia et. al, 2020](#)).
- Although the law provides for gender equality, customary practices—particularly in inheritance—often override formal legal provisions. These practices vary across ethnic groups and are shaped by matrilineal and patrilineal systems. In livestock production, roles remain strongly gendered: men typically manage large ruminants and housing infrastructure, while women are responsible for smaller livestock such as pigs, goats, and poultry. Women's contributions to livestock production in Lao PDR remain insufficiently recognised ([Lormaisim et. al., 2023](#)).
- > **Women's access to land remains a critical gender issue in Lao PDR's agriculture sector.** Secure land titles enable women to access credit, invest in agricultural technologies, and strengthen climate resilience, yet barriers to land documentation limit women's financial inclusion. Although a land titling system has existed since the mid-1990s, only about one-third of registered land parcels have been formally titled ([ADB, 2022](#), p. 24).
- > **Women's participation in local natural resource management in Lao PDR is even lower than their representation in regional and national governance.** Legal and customary practices, including requirements that village meetings be attended by male household heads and that land titles be held to participate in decision-making, restrict women's leadership and engagement. As a result, women remain significantly underrepresented in governance within a sector where they make up a growing share of the agricultural labour force ([ADB, 2022](#), p. 24).
- > **Another key gender issue in Lao PDR's agriculture sector is exposure to agricultural chemicals.** Female-headed farming households are slightly more likely to use chemical fertilizers and pesticides, often to reduce labour demands. Women and children face heightened health risks, as women are typically responsible for applying these chemicals, frequently while carrying children ([ADB, 2022](#), p. 24-25).
- > **Agriculture in Lao PDR is shifting from subsistence to commercial production, contributing to income growth and poverty reduction in rural areas.** However, this transition has also driven environmental degradation due to unsustainable resource use and weak regulation, and has disproportionately disadvantaged women from non–Lao-Tai ethnic groups, particularly those with limited Lao language skills and experience in the cash economy ([ADB, 2022](#), p. 23).

Older and younger people

- > **Lao PDR's youthful population presents both a significant opportunity and a growing policy challenge.** The Lao PDR has one of the youngest populations in Asia, making youth a key potential driver of social and economic development. However, while agriculture remains

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the main source of employment, many young people are moving away from the sector due to economic instability, low incomes, and growing migration opportunities ([Copt and Uraguchi, 2025](#)).

- > **Structural barriers continue to limit young people's engagement in agriculture.** Limited access to capital, weak infrastructure, and insufficient institutional support constrain youth aspirations and opportunities, while informal networks—though important—lack the capacity to drive the systemic changes in behaviours, structures, and norms needed to revitalise the sector ([Copt and Uraguchi, 2025](#)).
- > **There is a lack of recent data and evidence** on the roles and experiences of both older and younger people in agriculture (*based on the author's desk review*).

Marginalisation and social exclusion in waste management sector

- > **Solid waste generation in Lao PDR is on an upward trajectory.** According to the World Bank, total solid waste amounted to about 910,000 tonnes in 2020 and is projected to increase to 1.4 million tonnes by 2035, accounting for water content ([Noudeng et. al., 2024](#), p.2).
- > **Unlike developed countries such as Japan, which have built comprehensive waste management systems through successive legislation since the 1950s, Lao PDR's regulatory framework for waste management remains limited** ([Noudeng et. al., 2024](#), p.2).
 - The Environmental Protection Law (1999, revised 2013) establishes the core legal basis for waste management in Lao PDR, including pollution control and the classification and disposal of general and hazardous waste. This framework is reinforced by the 8th NSEDP and the National Green Growth Strategy to 2030, which promote waste reduction, the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle), and set targets to reduce per capita waste generation and increase proper waste treatment ([Noudeng et. al., 2024](#), p.4).
- > **In the absence of a dedicated waste management framework and clearly defined institutional responsibilities, much of the waste in Lao PDR is improperly managed.** Waste services are largely confined to urban areas, where only an estimated 40–60% of waste is collected and typically disposed of in poorly managed landfills. Uncollected waste is commonly burned or openly dumped, often into waterways ([Vongthavilay et. al., 2022](#)).

Informal workers

- > **A hierarchy of roles characterises the informal waste sector in Lao PDR.** This includes informal street waste pickers (ISWPs) who collect recyclables from domestic and commercial waste, landfill-based waste pickers operating at the KM32 site (WP32s) and formally employed waste collectors and truck drivers who supplement their income by collecting recyclables during work. Junk shops serve as key intermediaries linking waste pickers to the recycling market ([World Bank, 2024](#), p.1).
 - ISWPs and WP32s are the most marginalised and economically insecure groups within the informal waste sector, with WP32s facing the greatest hardship. Positioned at the end of the waste value chain, they are limited to collecting lower-quality, more contaminated recyclable materials ([World Bank, 2024](#), p.1).

Women

- > Based on [The World Bank's Unseen Green Jobs—A Study on Informal Waste Workers in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR \(2024\)](#), **women rarely apply for jobs in the waste management sector** and, when they do, are often not hired due to perceptions that the work is too physically demanding, dirty, or inappropriate for women. Several managers explicitly stated that they do

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not employ women as labourers, and the landfill manager at KM32 confirmed that women are not permitted to work as truck drivers. A VCOMS manager also cited distance to the landfill as a deterrent to female employment. Even in roles where women are present, such as administration or technical positions, their representation remains very low.

- As a result, **many women continue to rely on informal waste picking rather than accessing formal employment**. Female waste pickers additionally reported experiencing poor treatment and stigma from the public, reflecting broader social perceptions that waste-related work is inappropriate for women.
- > **Women and children in the informal waste sector are among the most socially disadvantaged groups and face significant health and safety risks due to inadequate waste management**. Despite their critical role in waste recovery and recycling within weak formal systems, their contributions remain largely unrecognised and unsupported. Efforts to improve waste collection and management must therefore explicitly account for the informal sector, where many waste pickers—predominantly women—work in hazardous and unsanitary conditions without adequate protection ([Environmental Protection Fund Office, 2025](#), p.64).

People with disabilities

Recent Laos-focused evidence on informal waste work is growing, but disability-disaggregated information remains limited. [The World Bank's Unseen Green Jobs—A Study on Informal Waste Workers in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR \(2024\)](#) profiles the scale and risks of informal waste work in Vientiane, documenting hazardous conditions and vulnerability among informal workers while highlighting the need for stronger protections and inclusion. In parallel, the World Bank-supported [Lao PDR Pollution and Waste Management Project \(2025\)](#) notes that Vientiane City authorities have registered 264 waste pickers at the Km32 landfill, and project instruments explicitly anticipate direct benefits for this group, including improved working conditions, training, and employment opportunities as waste management facilities are upgraded. However, in these recent publicly available waste-sector documents, persons with disabilities are not consistently identified or reported as a distinct subgroup (e.g., prevalence, disability types, specific barriers and accommodations), pointing to a critical evidence and programming gap.

Risks of addressing these inequalities

Efforts to address gender, disability, and social inequalities in Lao PDR's agriculture and waste management sectors carry a range of operational, safeguarding, political, and reputational risks. These risks are shaped by high levels of informality, restrictive civic space, entrenched social norms, limited data, and weak institutional accountability. If not carefully managed, interventions may unintentionally exacerbate exclusion, expose vulnerable groups to harm, or undermine programme effectiveness. The following is a summary of key areas of risk.

Safeguarding, SEAH, and protection risks

Working with highly marginalised groups—including women informal workers, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and children—presents elevated safeguarding and sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) risks. Women and girls in Lao PDR already face documented exposure to GBV, with evidence indicating particularly high vulnerability among women with disabilities. Informal waste pickers and agricultural labourers often operate outside formal oversight, increasing risks of exploitation, coercion, and retaliation when participating in projects or consultations. There is also a risk that engagement with informal waste workers or

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seasonal agricultural labourers could expose children to hazardous environments, especially where women bring children to work sites due to lack of childcare. Without explicit child safeguarding measures, livelihood interventions may inadvertently reinforce harmful coping strategies rather than reduce them.

Risks of exclusion due to informality and weak legal protection

The predominance of informal employment—particularly among women and persons with disabilities—creates a risk that project benefits, training opportunities, or formalisation efforts will primarily reach already better-positioned actors (e.g., male workers, formal enterprises, dominant ethnic groups). In the waste sector, the absence of any institution with explicit responsibility for informal waste workers heightens the risk that programmes will bypass the most marginalised. In agriculture, land tenure insecurity, customary practices, and male-dominated decision-making may limit women's ability to access project inputs, compensation, or climate-related support. Efforts that rely on household-level engagement risk reinforcing male control over resources unless intra-household power dynamics are explicitly addressed.

Disability exclusion and accessibility risks

A significant risk across both sectors is the systematic invisibility of persons with disabilities. Disability-disaggregated data are largely absent. Without intentional disability inclusion, interventions risk reinforcing existing barriers related to mobility, communication, stigma, and lack of personal assistance. There is also a risk that persons with disabilities—particularly women—may face heightened exposure to violence, stigma, or economic exclusion if targeted interventions are not accompanied by safeguards, confidentiality, and community sensitisation.

Risks of reinforcing gender norms and social backlash

Interventions that promote women's economic participation, leadership, or control over resources—particularly in agriculture and waste management—may trigger household or community-level resistance. Deeply embedded gender norms around leadership, inheritance, and “appropriate” work for women can result in backlash, including increased unpaid care burdens, social stigma, or domestic conflict. Similarly, initiatives that challenge norms related to disability, ethnicity, or sexual orientation may provoke resistance if not carefully framed and sequenced. There is a risk that programmes perceived as externally driven or culturally insensitive may undermine local ownership and sustainability.

Environmental and occupational health risks

Addressing inequalities in pollution-intensive sectors carries health and safety risks for both beneficiaries and implementers. In waste management, inadequate protective equipment, exposure to hazardous materials, and unsafe working conditions pose ongoing risks to informal workers. In agriculture, increased use of agrochemicals—often managed by women—may exacerbate health risks if safer practices and training are not integrated. Interventions that expand productivity without parallel investment in occupational health and environmental safeguards risk worsening long-term health outcomes for already vulnerable groups.

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