

## **Hmong Women and Education: Challenges for Empowerment in the Lao PDR**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how Hmong women's educational access in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has changed in recent decades. To investigate this developmental change, the study adapted a mixed research methodology; quantitative data was collected from the Lao national census. A series of qualitative interviews with research informants was also conducted. This study argues that for Hmong women in Laos, access to educational opportunities has been increasingly emphasized due to internal/external aid, which has positively impacted women's participation in the labor market, resulting in greater opportunities for empowerment. With regards to the latter, the lives of Hmong women have also changed significantly in recent years through increased access to higher-wage positions in Laos.

**Keywords:** Hmong, Laos, Women, Education

### **Introduction/Background**

Being both a minority and a woman implies having to overcome double the number of barriers to receive an education. This is especially true for Hmong women in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), who generally receive less education than their male counterparts (Mason, 1986:108). As Hmong belong to one of the largest ethnic groups in the Lao PDR, Hmong women have long been one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups. However, in recent years, the nation has engaged in educational reforms as part of its development efforts. This study begins with a literature review on Hmong women's education in the Lao PDR to set the groundwork for an assessment of how the current educational access of Hmong women in Laos has improved.

Marlaine Lockheed and Adriaan Vespoor (1991:1-5) explain the importance of education in developing countries as being based upon two aspects: "economic" and "social" development. In addition, Nelly Stromquist (1997:17-18) emphasizes that education is a tool for women's advancement and contributes to the economic, social, and political development

of the nation. With regard to the first factor, education is connected to economic development, especially in developing countries; individual incomes will increase as people obtain education, and as occupational production power increases, poverty is reduced. Second, regarding social development, it is pointed out that educated women tend to delay marriage and have fewer children than their non-educated counterparts. Furthermore, such women tend to make better decisions regarding family health, hygiene, and nutrition that ultimately contribute to lower mortality rates (Stromquist, 1997: 17-18). Finally, regarding political capital, women with a higher level of education are more analytical, and they have broader perspectives compared to those who have not been exposed to a systematic education or to training programs. Thus, education is an indispensable tool of empowerment. Therefore, this study also focuses on education as a means of empowering Hmong women and minorities.

### **Clarification of the Ethnic Groups in Lao PDR**

In the 1960s, the method for classifying ethnic groups in Laos was determined according to the topography of each group's location. More specifically, such classifications included "Lao Loum" (Lowland Lao), people who lived in areas that were approximately 200–400 m above mean sea level; "Lao Theung" (Upland Lao), people who lived in areas approximately 300–900 m above mean sea level; and "Lao Soung" (Highland Lao), people who lived in areas approximately 800–1,600 m above mean sea level. This classification spread rapidly within the public sector of Laos but it proved insufficient for grasping the diversity of the ethnic groups across the Lao PDR (Chazee, 1995:10-11).

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2000:5), the 1995 census categorized the population into 47 ethnicities, which were divided into four broader ethnic classifications : "Lao Loum" was renamed as the "Tai-Kadai" group (accounted for 66.2%); "Lao Theung" was renamed as "Austro-Asiatic"<sup>1</sup> (23.0%); and "Lao Soung" (Highland Lao) was classified into the "Hmong-Yao" (7.4%) and "Sino-Tibetan" groups (2.7%).<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Tai-Kadai group became the ethnic majority, while the others were the ethnic minorities.

However, the latest 2005 census (Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing, 2006:8) no longer showed the four broader ethnic classifications ; instead, it listed the names of 49 different ethnic groups. Since it is difficult to describe each of these 49 groups, the four broader ethnic classifications based on topography (i.e., the three origins) will be used in this study to capture the overall aspects of ethnic history in Laos as well as majority/minority concerns.

First, with regard to the majority, the Tai-Kadai group (formerly the Lao Loum) began migrating into present day northern Laos in the ninth century and created the Kingdom of Lane Xang in 1353 (ADB, 2000:141). The Lao majority speaks the national language, Lao, and has traditionally dominated the political and economic arenas in the lowlands. In addition, the majority of the Tai-Kadai are Buddhists and have had relatively easy access to formal education compared to other ethnic groups.

Second, the Austro-Asiatic group (formerly the Lao Theung) has been present on the Southeast Asian mainland for at least 5,000 years and represents the oldest and most diverse indigenous people, both in the broader region and in the Lao PDR (Chamberlain, 1995:14). Lao history indicates that the earliest inhabitants that predated the arrival of the Lao-Tai were the Mon-Khmer, but there is limited information regarding this population. Within the broader ethnic classifications, each ethnic group had their own languages and cultures, and they generally lived in mountainous areas. Moreover, their religions included Buddhism, animism, or other religious practices.

Next, is the Hmong-Yao group which is the focal point of study in this paper. According to James Chamberlain (1996:13), this group was previously known by the Chinese term “Meo-Yao.” These distinct groups came from South China and established themselves in the mountainous regions of Northern Laos approximately 200 years ago. Similar to the Sino-Tibetan group, they usually constructed their hamlets on mountaintops; they were farmers who engaged in cultivation and animal husbandry (Rattavong, 1996: 8). The population of Hmong in southwestern China is in the several millions with more than one million in Southeast Asia, including more than 500,000 in Vietnam, 120,000 in Thailand, and pockets of Hmong communities in Myanmar (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008:13). The 2005 census shows that the total population of Hmong and Yao in Lao PDR was 451,946 and 27,449 which accounted for 8.0% and 0.5%, respectively, of the country’s population.

Fourth, the Sino-Tibetan group are known to have arrived from Burma or Yunnan(China) during the early 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chamberlain, *ibid*:16). They established themselves mostly in the northern provinces near the borders of the Lao territory. Their livelihood was obtained from rice cultivation, domesticating animals, and forest produce (Rattavong, *ibid*: 7). According to Jacqui Chagnon and Roger Rumpf (1982:164), “Historically, many Lao Loum, who barely comprise the majority, have tended to look down upon the poorly educated Lao Theung and Lao Soung groups.” In fact, in the sixth ordinary session of the National Assembly in 2008, the government adopted an agreement to recognize only one nationality—i.e. all citizens are Lao.<sup>3</sup>

### **National Policy and Education for Minorities after 1975**

When the Lao PDR was established, there was no specific policy or concern for ethnic minorities. Chagnon and Rumpf (1982:164) indicate that no formal or traditional education system existed for the Lao Soung or Lao Theung minorities before and during the French era. Until the end of World War II, the government of the kingdom had considered ethnic minorities as disadvantaged people who had existed since ancient times, rather than treating them on an equitable basis with the ethnic majority (Wekkin, 1982:189). Although no official policy was established for minorities, the government gradually began making efforts

toward assimilation after the 1960s and implemented policies to attempt to integrate ethnic minorities who did not share the religions and customs of the majority as a single Laotian nation (Chazee, *ibid*:10-11). Hmong scholar Yang Dao states that during the 1970s, the rate of the Hmong who could not read or write was as high as 99% in certain Laos provinces.<sup>4</sup>

After 1975, the government did not provide separate policies or development plans for ethnic minorities, beyond directing these groups to resettle in the lowlands and adapt to a less migratory mode of production. At that time, the Central Committee for Ethnic Minorities (CCEM), which was the highest level multiethnic organization, was established to strengthen solidarity and reconciliation among ethnic groups. In 1981, the Central Party passed the decree on Ethnic Affairs (with a focus on the Hmong ethnic group), which developed strategies to implement the concerned decree as well as acknowledging the important role and participation of minorities in the “liberation, sovereignty, and development of the nation (ADB, 2000:143).” In 1991, the First Lao PDR Constitution was promulgated, which stated, “All powers are of the people, by the people and for the interest of the multi-ethnic people of all strata in society with the workers, farmers and intellectuals as key components.” In the Constitution, Article 8 concerning ethnic minorities reads as follows:

*The state will carry out a policy of unity and equality among the various ethnic groups. All ethnic groups have the right to preserve and improve their own traditions and culture and those of the nation. Discrimination between ethnic groups is forbidden. The State will carry out every means in order to continue to improve and raise the economic level of all ethnic groups.*<sup>5</sup>

In 1996, the government advocated in policy documents, the expansion of educational opportunities among ethnic minorities as well as efforts to promote their cultural heritages. Thus, the government has gradually implemented policies that have the stated goal of making additional educational resources available to ethnic minorities. The current government policy for women overlaps these policies, since it included disadvantaged groups. In 1998, the Ministry of Education (hereafter the MOE)<sup>6</sup> conducted an overview of government policy toward education and as a long-term objective established and promoted vocational training for women and girls, minority groups, and disadvantaged adults (Peters, 1998:5).

According to the “Education for All National Plan of Action 2003-2015” (MOE, 2005:40), bilingual education in the first grade of primary school would be introduced. In addition, the latest educational policy document titled, “National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education 2011-2015,” aims to eliminate disparities in educational access for disadvantaged groups (especially women and girls), ethnic groups, and people with socio-economic difficulties (MOES, 2011:1). According to the government, through these

improvements, ethnic groups and women will eventually have access to equal educational opportunities in Laos.

Although these policies and strategies focused on improving the educational index, detailed data was not introduced in an actual context. For instance, Myo Thant and Richard Vokes (1997:169) indicate that the education index, such as gross enrollment rate, significantly improved and Angela Cincotta (2006:19) also reports an improvement in the literacy rate by utilizing data from the studies by the United National Development Programme (UNDP, 2001:16)<sup>7</sup> and Chagnon and Rumpf (1982:168), respectively. Besides, Cincotta (ibid:18) indicates that the government policy changes, such as moving on to bilingual education, provided an opportunity to expand the propaganda network to non-Lao speaking areas. However, the actual effects of the policy change have not been researched extensively in communities across Laos.

### **Method**

A mixed research methodology was adopted for the conduct of this study. Quantitative data was collected from the national census and through informant interviews. Education index data, such as the literacy rate and the school attendance rate, from the 1995–2005 censuses (State Planning Committee 1997: Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing 2006) were analyzed to assess changes in Hmong women's education status and empowerment. Since official data from the national census is presented every ten years, the 2005 census contains the latest data that could be used at the present time.<sup>8</sup> These censuses enable the identification of changes in Hmong women's educational access in Laos from 1995 to 2005. To better understand the impact at the local level, qualitative interviews were also conducted with stakeholders in January 2013 (in Vientiane), who were involved in educational assistance activities or programs. The affiliations of the interviewees were as follows: a faculty member at the National University of Laos (male), a deputy director of a government organization (female), a project coordinator in the public service sector at a Ministry entity (female), a Hmong specialist engaged in educational activities (female), and a Hmong officer in the education sector at an administrative organization (female). Moreover, interviews with four Hmong female students were conducted to investigate subjective views of their experiences with education.

### **Access to Education: Gender and Ethnic Origin in the 1990s**

Many Hmong have had no formal education in Laos. In the Lao PDR, the first village school was built around 1939, and thereafter the first Hmong high school graduates were in 1942, the first Hmong college graduates were in 1966, and the first doctorate awarded to a Hmong was in 1972 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008:16). However, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 1996:78), less than half of the

ethnic students entering primary school had completed five years (the full program), more than one-half of ethnic minority girls never attended school at all, and among these girls, most had only completed the second grade.

To examine educational access during the 1990s in more detail, various education indexes, such as enrollment, promotion, and repetition rates by ethnic origin are presented. First, the examination of the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER)<sup>9</sup> by gender and ethnic origins reveals significant disparities. For example, female students show remarkably lower GER than their male counterparts, especially those from ethnic minority groups.

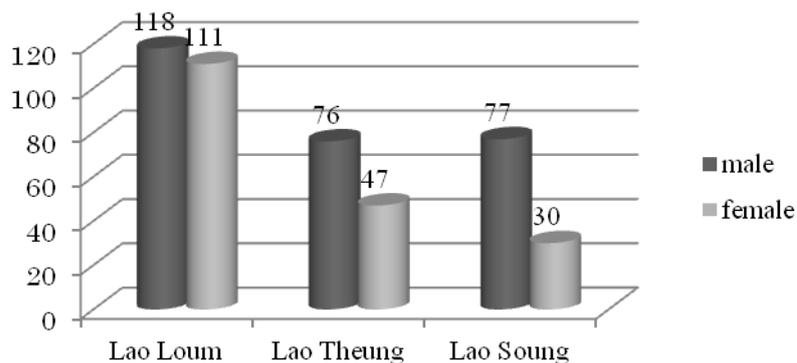


Figure 1. Gross enrollment rate in primary education by gender and ethnicity

Note: Created by the author, based on MOE (1995:6)

Figure 1 clearly and consistently shows that gender disparity exists among all ethnic groups: Lao Loum show slight disparities in the GER (7%) but the Lao Theung and Lao Soung groups show a gap of 29% and 47%, respectively. Since only the GER data is available, it is difficult to grasp actual enrollment based on students' particular ages. However, the noticeable difference between Lao Loum male (118%) and Lao Soung female (30%) access to education during the 1990s cannot be denied. Second, what is the situation of enrolled students at the end of the school year? Even though they enrolled at the beginning of the school year, there is no guarantee that students will continue and complete their education. Thus, examining promotion, repetition, and dropout rates can provide a greater understanding of enrolled students' progress. According to the ADB (1996: 22), girls in rural areas typically enroll in schools at nine years of age and drop out within two years. The detailed data shown in Table 1 and Figure 2 (based on previous data from the MOE) indicate significant differences by ethnic origins.

Table 1. Promotion, repetition, and dropout rates for primary level education (1<sup>st</sup> grade) by ethnic origin (1991–92)

	Promotion	Repetition	Dropout
Lao Loum	47	43	10
Lao Theung	34	41	25
Lao Soung (includes Hmong)	37	40	23

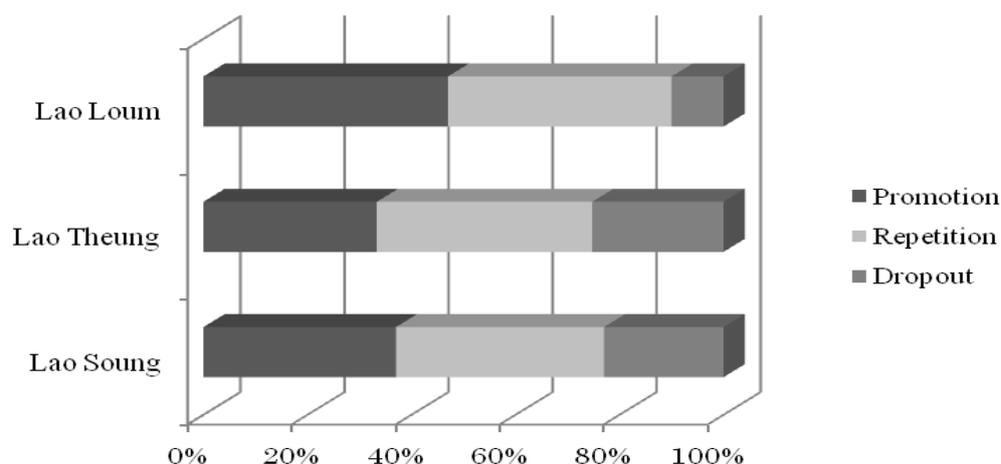


Figure 2. Promotion, repetition, and dropout rates for primary level education (1<sup>st</sup> grade) by ethnic origin (1991–92)

Note: Created by the author, based on MOE (1995:35).

Table 1 and Figure 2 indicate that there are significant educational disparities between persons of different ethnic origins in Laos. For example, the promotion rate of the Lao Loum group is high, which suggests that members of this ethnic classification are promoted to the next grade more often than those belonging to minority groups. Dropout rates of those assigned to the other ethnic classifications (25% and 23%, respectively) are twice as high as the majority group (Lao Loum: 10%).<sup>10</sup>

This disadvantaged situation in education may also be observed in the Final Country Report of 2000.<sup>11</sup> This report indicates that approximately 45% of Tai-Kadai (Lao Loum) students who enter primary school (1st grade) enter secondary school. While this number is low, it is somewhat higher than those of the other two groups. For example, only 10.6% of the Austro-Asiatic (Lao Theung) group and 17.8% of the Hmong-Yao and Sino-Tibetan (Lao Soung) groups advance to secondary school. In this case, the situation for girls is even worse since, among the Hmong-Yao and Sino-Tibetan groups, roughly one-quarter of the total enrolled are girls and the repetition rate for the girls is also higher than that of the boys.

## **Factors behind the Disparities**

The data also show that disparities exist in terms of “gender” and “ethnicity.” According to Thant and Vokes (1997:167), there was a tradition of educating boys in monasteries even before the advent of modern education and differential gender role socialization drew girls toward domestic concerns.<sup>1 2</sup> Being an ethnic minority in Laos also increases the probability of being placed in a disadvantaged position in relation to educational access. According to H.A. Peters (1998:8), the Ministry of Education (MOE) recognizes that minority girls in remote villages of the southern plateau region tend to marry and bear children at a young age. In minority cultures with patrilineal traditions, such as the Hmong and Yao, women still have strong roles in commercial and economic activities. In addition, fewer family resources are allocated for female as opposed to male children in minority cultures (Thant and Vokes, *ibid*: 171). These aforementioned facts contribute to the low involvement of girls in education.

Regarding “ethnicity,” many teachers are not accustomed to teaching the children of ethnic minorities who speak languages other than Lao, and very few teachers from other ethnic groups exist in Laos. According to the Asian Development Bank (2000:52), based on the data from the MOE, the majority of teachers came from the Tai-Kadai group in 1997–98, especially at the primary level, where more than 80% of the teachers were from the majority group. As a result, since the majority of the teachers could not communicate in the same language as the minority students, they were unable to help them in their own language, a factor which serves to increase educational disparities among ethnic groups.

In addition to the social and cultural factors that overlap with the gender disparity issues, the school curriculum is another serious factor that may contribute to educational disparities in Laos. The ADB (1999:44) also observes that the school curriculum is the same throughout the country, but the MOE would like to see more local content introduced. In the current situation, the content of subjects and time schedules that do not fit local needs are shown as problems related to the educational curriculum. For instance, it was necessary to teach subjects that were suited to the production activities and situational environment of ethnic minorities, such as knowledge regarding sanitation, sickness in barn animals, and problems with drinking water, in the view of Hmong informants (Inui, 2009:133). The policy of using only Lao as the language of instruction also contributes to the educational disadvantage of ethnic minorities. The sole use of Lao as the instructional language results in low enrollments among children of ethnic minorities (Thant and Vokes, 1997:178).

## **External and Internal Aid to Ethnic Minorities and Women in the Lao PDR**

### **The Increase in External AID**

In regards to the question of what types of efforts have been made and assistance

provided to overcome these barriers and improve the limited access to education among minorities and women, Thant and Vokes (ibid: 166) point out that the Lao PDR has relied, to a great extent, on inflows of external assistance since 1975 as well as the provision of foreign scholarships and training abroad. However, implementations of international projects have been restricted within the Lao PDR, and international organizations have thus faced numerous barriers to program delivery. However, in overcoming such difficulties, international organizations have continued to negotiate with the Lao government and proceed with various projects. Since the late 1990s, the number of multilaterally funded projects have significantly increased (Cincotta, 2006:20) the majority of which have imposed gender and ethnic minority criteria.

The following two factors possibly triggered the rapid increase in international assistance. First, there was the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, in which it was confirmed that the Lao PDR had not attained universal primary education. At this time, the net enrollment rate (NER) in Laos was roughly 60% and many of the non-enrolled identified were ethnic minorities and women who did not attend school. After the WCEFA, international assistance for developing countries focused on Education for All (EFA) recommendations and the Lao PDR began receiving various types of education projects, especially for minorities and women. The second trigger was the adaptation of the “new economy system” in 1987 when the government began embracing international assistance. Moreover, the appearance of the Hmong as refugees in countries such as the USA and Australia increased their visibility and status. As a result, the Hmong in the Lao PDR were targeted by NGOs and government foreign aid organizations as a group that required assistance.

During the 1990s, the top donors to the Lao PDR were the Asian Development Bank and Japan, but since then, the number of international organizations has gradually increased. Regarding bilateral aid, after Japan, Norway, Canada, and Vietnam became major donors in Laos for educational programs targeting ethnic minorities and women. Large donor agencies, such as the World Bank (WB) and the ADB, required in-depth studies and ethnic-specific development plans for minority populations that would be significantly impacted by the development projects that they were funding. Thereafter, meeting the needs of minority groups and the preservation of their unique cultures was increasingly emphasized (ADB, 2000:152).

Not only the projects instituted by the Asian Development Bank but also numerous international projects that focused on ethnic minorities and women were implemented during the 1990s in the Lao PDR. Since it is difficult to introduce all of the international aid projects, information regarding major international projects (objectives, types of donors), educational resources and infrastructure, teacher-related training development, social and cultural factors, and curriculum development are summarized in Table 2. As the developmental change from

1995 to 2005 will be examined in the final half of this study, only the projects beginning in the early 1990s and ending in the 2000s are included here.

Table 2. Projects related to minority and female education from 1990 to the early 2000s, Laos

Factors (Causes of disparity)	Project Objective	Donor (Government)	(UN and Other Organizations)	(NGOs)
Educational resources and infrastructure	School construction	Japan, Norway, Switzerland	WB, ADB, UNHCR, ADB and AusAID, UNICEF and MOE	BAC, Minsai Center WE, JRRC, SCF (UK), ESF, and World Vision
	Building boarding schools	Vietnam		
	Distance education		UNESCO	ZOA
Teacher-related problems	Teacher training	Sweden	WB, AusAID, ADB, UNICEF and MOE	NCA
Social and cultural factors	Community development <sup>13</sup>		ADB and AusAID	
Curriculum development	Pedagogical assistance, Material development		WB, AusAID	

Literacy improvement	Basic education (literacy, skills training) Adults	Canada (IDRC) Norway (NORAD)	MOE and UNESCO, UNDP, MOE and UNICEF, UNDP	ESF
	Children	Sweden	UNICEF, UNDP, ADB and AusAID, ESCAP	CWS, CRS, Redd Barna

### **Abbreviations:**

IDRC: International Development Research Centre (Canada); NORAD: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation; AusAID: The Australian Agency for International Development; ESCAP: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; BAC: Buddhist Aid Center; WE: World Education; JSRC: Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee; SCF (UK): Save the Children Fund; ESF: Ecoles sans Frontier; ZOA: ZOA International; NCA: Norwegian Church Aid; CWS: Church World Services; and CRS: Catholic Relief Services.

Note: (Created by the author, based on MOE (2000: 28-39) and ADB (2000:180-186).

Apart from the projects stated above, basic education projects (improving literacy and teaching life skills) were implemented, especially for minorities and women in Laos. Although, it is difficult to describe all of the projects in this study, examples of major projects for ethnic minorities and girls will be briefly introduced in the following section.

### **Projects for Minority and Female Education in Laos**

UNICEF and the Ministry of Education implemented the “Basic Education Project” in 1992–96, which focused on education development in rural and minority districts. After this period, the ADB and Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) implemented the “Basic Education (Girls’) Project” to bring more women into the mainstream of socio-economic development by utilizing progressive efforts to improving their education levels. More specifically, the project aimed to expand primary education access for girls in regions with large minority ethnic group populations by providing primary education facilities and strengthening their capacity at the central and provincial levels; the program involved three components: building multiple-grade schools by providing education materials, recruiting and training ethnic teachers, and strengthening management systems and capacity (ADB, 2008:1-2).

The “Lao-Australian Basic Education Project” (LABEP) was another major project. AusAID attempted to develop a unique curriculum for ethnic minorities, especially for the Hmong and Khmu. The project involved establishing a complete school<sup>1 4</sup> so that minority students could complete their compulsory education; setting a curriculum with “Lao as a second language” the training of teachers with the goal of helping the children of ethnic minorities learn Lao smoothly; and the creation of a curriculum as well as supplemental teaching materials that related to the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities (Illawarra Technology Corporation, 1999:6-7).<sup>1 5</sup>

One of the most recent projects for supporting basic education in the Lao PDR has been the “Access to Basic Education in Laos Program” (ABEL), which has involved a collaborative project between and among the MOE, AusAID, UNICEF, and WFP, with the ultimate goal of achieving universal primary education, especially among ethnic minorities

and girls by 2015.<sup>16</sup> Although these aforementioned projects focused on ethnic minorities and women, information regarding projects that only assisted Hmong women is difficult to find. Therefore, the following section examines educational development change among ethnic minorities more generally as well as women in Laos.

## **Results**

### **Developmental Changes in Minorities and Women**

How has the access to education of ethnic minorities and women in Laos changed in recent years and are these populations still behind the general population of the country in terms of educational access? Obviously, various international projects have focused on providing resources to enhance minorities' and women's education in Laos in the past few decades, and therefore educational indexes, such as those associated with the literacy and enrollment rates, have improved. Data by ethnicity is not available, but enrollment rate of primary education in Xieng Khouang province, with high Hmong population, is 99.1% in 2014<sup>17</sup>. This indicates that most children there now have access to primary school.

According to a National University of Laos faculty member, whom this author interviewed, the majority of ethnic groups, including the Hmong, receive access to education and they are accepting of and embracing educational opportunities. This professor also mentioned three factors that have changed among the ethnic minorities, including the Hmong: 1) an increase in the number of schools; 2) a growth in the number of teachers; and 3) economic change and growth within the country. In fact, based on the 1995 and 2005 censuses, the number of primary schools in Laos increased from 6,316 to 8,424 and the number of teachers increased from 24,600 to 27,800. In addition, the percentage of unqualified teachers decreased from 25% to 10% in approximately 10 years according to government statistics (Committee for Planning and Investment, 2005: 103-105).

### **Literacy Rate of the Hmong and Other Ethnic Groups**

As enumerated in the 2005 census, the nationwide literacy rate was 73%, this was 10% higher than the rate measured across Laos in 1995 (63%). However, the literacy rate differed considerably according to province, gender, and ethnicity. For example, the rate was higher than the national average for the majority Lao group (85%), whereas among the other ethnic minority groups it was below the national average. Table 3 and Figure 3 show the change in the enumerated literacy rates for these three ethnic groups.<sup>18</sup>

Table 3. Literacy rate among women from major ethnic groups 1995–2005 (%)

	Lao Loum		Lao Theung		Lao Soung	
	Lao	Phoutai	Khmu	Katang	Hmong	Kor (Akah)
1995	65.1	50.1	22.7	12.8	26.5	0.7
2005	78.9	42.5	42.5	20.4	45	3.4
Growth rate	21.1	19.3	87.2	59.3	218.5	385.7

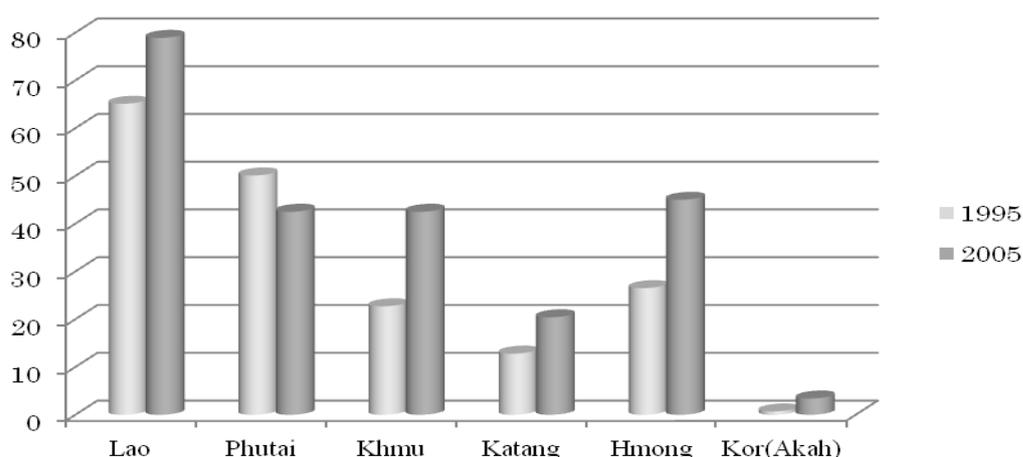


Figure 3. Literacy rate among women from major ethnic groups during 1995–2005 (%)

Note: Created by the author, based on the 1995 [p. 41] and 2005 [p. 72] censuses.

Table 3 and Figure 3 show that the female literacy rate of the Lao Loum group is much higher than that of the minorities. Attention also needs to be paid to the difference between the literacy rate between the Lao and the Kor (Akah) group, which was 78.9% and 3.4%, respectively. This figure shows that a huge disparity still exists in educational access for some ethnic minorities.

However, some positive developments may be found in the data. For example, the growth in literacy among the majority group, the Lao Loum, has remained at approximately 20%. Conversely, the literacy growth rates of the Lao Theung and the Lao Soung have been extremely high. The enumerated growth rates of the Hmong and the Kor have been 218.5% (8.1% to 25.8%) and 385.7% (0.7 to 3.4%), respectively; both ethnic groups have shown an increase in literacy 10–15 times compared to the already high rate of the majority group. It is obvious that this positive result has been due in part to the basic education and literacy projects that have been initiated by various international organizations in Laos since the 1990s.

Focusing on the change among Hmong women, the growth rate for women (218.5%) has been much higher than that among men (40.3%), as illustrated by Table 4 and Figure 4.

These figures show that the literacy rate among women in Laos dramatically improved in this 10-year period.

Table 4. Literacy rate of the Hmong (men and women) from 1995 to 2005

Year	Men	Women	Total
1995	45.7	8.1	26.5
2005	64.1	25.8	45.6
Growth rate	40.3	218.5	71%

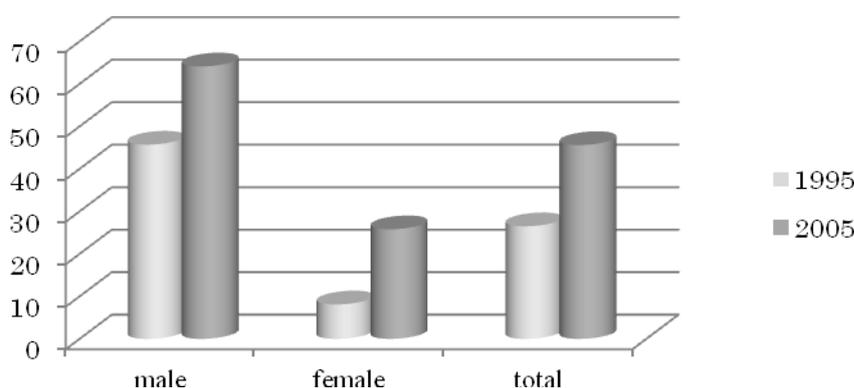


Figure 4. Literacy rate of Hmong (men and women) from 1995 to 2005

Note: Created by the author, based on the 1995 [p.41] and 2005 [p.72] censuses.

External assistance, including literacy projects, has had a considerable impact on improving the literacy rate in Laos. Some informants in the researcher's interviews stated:

*Hmong are smart in their personality. They work hard. The top students in national competitions are always Hmong.* (Project coordinator)

*Hmong are diligent and hard workers. Currently, we see Hmong women in higher positions in politics. They are popular for being clever and bright.* (Hmong specialist)

*Hmong are hard workers. They study hard once they receive opportunities. Now, some Hmong female students are studying abroad with scholarships.* (Hmong officer)

### School Attendance by Gender and Ethnicity

The trends in school attendance shown by the census provides evidence of developmental change. In the 2005 Laos census, school attendance was defined as attendance at any regular accredited educational institution or program, public or private, organized at

any level of education. In addition, it is specified as “never been to school,” “currently at school,” and “left school.”<sup>19</sup> A higher rate of “never been to school” represents low educational participation.

By utilizing the census data for each ethnic group, it is possible to compare the data on a historical axis and view transitional change. More specifically, a nationwide comparison of the 1995 and 2005 censuses shows that the enumerated rate of children who had never been to school has decreased. For example, in 2005, the rate of “never been to school” changed from 43.7% to 31.7% in 1995 for Phoutai women, from 71.1% to 44.2 % for Khmu women, and from 81.6% to 72.6 % for Katang women. Regarding women from other ethnic minorities, for the Kor (Akha) and Tri, the percentages of those who have “never been to school” was much higher at 85.3% and 87.2%, respectively. Although there have been overall improvements for all of the ethnic groups, women still lag behind within each group.

With regard to Hmong women, what changes may be observed? The 2005 census shows that the rate of “never been to school” decreased from 83.7% to 55.6% over 10 years. Corollary to this, the rate of “at school” increased from 10.7 % to 25.8%, thus illustrating that the enrollment rate increased during the same time period. Since the rate of “left school” includes students who have completed school, it is difficult to use this specification to determine the level of educational improvement. However, only the rate of “never been to school” shows a positive change for Hmong women. Furthermore, a review of historical trends (1995–2005) shows that educational access among the Hmong in Laos has significantly improved, which ultimately should lead to better employment and other opportunities for Hmong females.

Figure 5. School attendance among Hmong women from 1995 to 2005

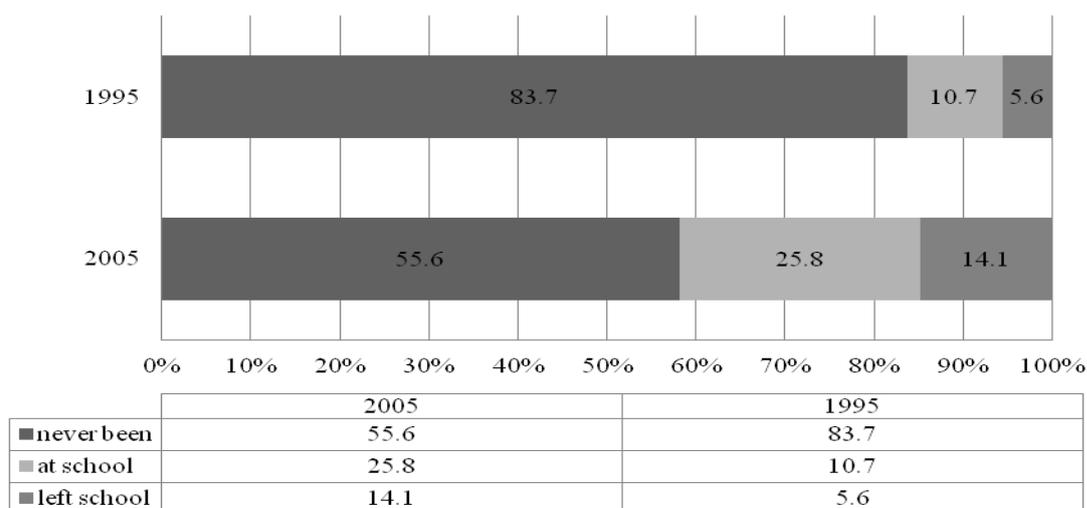


Table 5. School attendance among Hmong women from 1995 to 2005

Note: Created by the author, based on the 1995 census [p.34] and [p.62].<sup>20</sup>

Summing up the researcher's interviews, Hmong in Laos have become increasingly conscious of the importance of education and they are making significant strides in educational settings as well as in broader Laos society. Regarding Hmong school attendance in Laos, the Hmong specialist described how educational access and Hmong parents' perspectives on education have changed. She also perceived that the school infrastructure in the villages had greatly improved and that parents had recognized that shifting agricultural cultivation no longer provide economic advantages. In addition, the project coordinator mentioned that an increasing number of Hmong women had moved to Vientiane to work. The increased involvement of Hmong women could also be seen in politics, for example, the Chairperson of the National Congress is now a Hmong woman. Many more Hmong, in fact, have come to hold important government positions in Laos since 2000 (Yang, 2003: 282-283).

*Yes, in the villages, better educational opportunities were given to Hmong girls. One of the Hmong girls attended a nursing college and returned to work as a nurse. And I know girls who found work in secondary schools and the Department of Education in Xieng Khouang after graduating from Teacher Training College.*

(Hmong specialist)

*I think more Hmong girls have access to education compared to the past. Since the Hmong are smart, they are often promoted if they receive the opportunity. In fact, the winners of the National Competition in math and physics are always Hmong. Both boys and girls are able to study now.*

(Project coordinator)

Based on the interview data, it is clear that Hmong women have made considerable progress in education as demonstrated by increased participation, and educational achievement compared to past decades in Laos.

How about the Hmong women themselves? Opinions from four Hmong female student informants (13, 15, 16, and 20 years old, respectively), were obtained in interviews at Luang Phrabang, Lao PDR in December 2013. Among these participants, three students responded positively to the research question ("How has educational access for Hmong changed?") and referred to the improved situations in enrollment, transportation access, and parents' attitudes toward education. For example, regarding the reasons for such improved access, responses included: "More friends go to school compared to before" (a 13-year-old); "Transportation became convenient and we can go to school by motorbike (a 15-year-old); and "Due to a change in parents' thinking related to education, more women go to universities" (a 20-year-old). The latter mentioned that she could continue on to higher education as her parents realize the importance of education.

However, negative feedback was also noted in the interviews. For example, the 13-year-old mentioned that despite improvements, many parents still believe that boys should study instead of girls. In addition, one girl (a 16-year-old) did not feel that any improvements were made regarding access to education. This informant indicated that parents' negative thinking about girls was still an obstacle. According to this student, "there are still parents who think that girls work and boys study." These critical opinions show that traditional family views may continue to impact some women's access to education. Furthermore, based on the viewpoints of these students, it is clear that there are not always positive perceptions among female students regarding educational access for Hmong women in Laos.

### **Participation in the Labor Force**

The education index examined earlier shows that the educational access of Hmong women in Laos has greatly improved, which suggests that there are currently more opportunities in the field of education compared to that in the past. The 2005 census indicated that "higher education can obviously explain a higher rate of employment than a lower level of education" (Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing, 2006). This raises two questions. First, how has Hmong women's participation in the labor market and employment status changed? Second, has the improvement in educational access had an impact on the Hmong female labor force in Laos?

The census measures the activity status of the Lao PDR population using the concept of "the usually active population," which involves an individual's main activity over the past 12 months. For measurement, the population is divided into "economically active" and "economically not active." The active population is then divided into two categories: those who were employed and those who were unemployed but looking for work over the past 12 months. To compare major ethnicities with the national average, the data associated with the nation as a whole, that of the Phoutai (majority) and of the Hmong are presented in Table 6 and Figure 6.

According to the 2005 census, the national average of "economically active" adults in the Lao PDR was 65.4% and among Hmong women, 67.9%, both figures do not exceed that of Phoutai women (69.1%). Concurrently, the rate of "not economically active" of Hmong women (30%) is also close to the national average (32.7%). Of course, "economically active" does not always confirm that these women are economically empowered, especially since the amount of income, the type of occupation, and the security of employment are not available in the census. Yet, this data indicates that the activity status of Hmong women has been moving closer to the ethnic majority and national average in Laos.

Table 6. Percent of Distribution by Activity Status (Women)

	Hmong	Phoutai	Average
Economically active (Employed)	67.9	69.1	65.4
(Unemployed)	0.7	0.4	0.9
Not economically active	30	30	32.7
NS	1.4	0.9	1

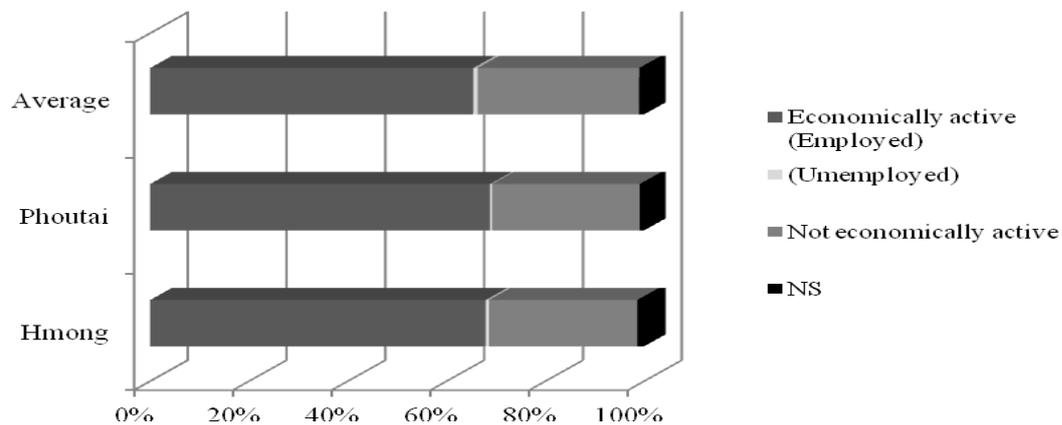


Figure 6. Percent of Distribution by Activity Status (Women)

Note: Created by the author, based on the 2005 census [pp.88-90].

The following two research informants emphasized the need for more income generation activities and employment of the Hmong in accordance with social change. First, according to the National University faculty member, cash income had dramatically increased not only in Vientiane but also in minority areas such as Udomxai. In addition, the average income of the province had almost doubled (\$300 to \$600 per year), due to the investment of Chinese enterprises, and there were more employment opportunities available in the areas of agriculture or construction.

*Due to the circulation of mobile phones, it is easy to obtain information about working opportunities in the cities. Therefore, minorities, including Hmong women, move to the cities like Vientiane and work in factories, restaurants, and guesthouses.*

(National University faculty member)

Second, the Hmong officer attributed recent economic change among Hmong women to their involvement in the public labor force, especially as educators. She also stated that, “more Hmong females go to teacher training college with scholarships.” Since teaching positions enable these women to obtain stable incomes as well as greater authority and power in the community, education has become increasingly common as a route towards economic

mobility among Hmong women in Laos. Regarding their public labor force participation, this informant stated that more Hmong people worked at the Ministry compared to past decades. It is important to note that, as a requirement for working with the government, one must have a bachelor's degree. In these cases, the Hmong have recognized the importance of education as well as the recognition that more education provides better job opportunities. Moreover, their participation in the labor force has had a positive impact on the labor market and enhances their confidence and leadership skills; both are vital for achieving genuine empowerment.

Social change among Hmong women in Laos has also been confirmed by researchers. According to Loes Schenk-Sandbergen (2012: 67, 78), minority women, such as those of the Hmong and the Khmu, attempt to empower themselves by utilizing a variety of methods. For example, some women may adopt certain majority group cultural norms or the "matri-lifestyle", which values women's lives and reduces their burdens to alleviate poverty and gender equality.<sup>2 1</sup> Furthermore, some women have chosen to resettle from remote villages to locations where there are better roads and nearby markets. As a result, they have become more efficient in performing numerous tasks, which, in turn, enhances economic mobility.

## Conclusion

*Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.*

*—ICPD Programme of Action, Paragraph 4.2<sup>2 2</sup>*

Existing data and perspectives from government and institutional representatives show that educational access for minority women, especially for Hmong women, has improved in Laos. More specifically, access to educational opportunities for Hmong women has become increasingly available due to internal/external aid. While discrimination and other barriers to mobility among the Hmong in Laos have not been eliminated, the increased educational participation of Hmong females has positively impacted their mobility in the labor market and increased their labor force participation in Laos more generally. It should also be noted that some critical points, particularly related to traditional cultural norms were expressed by the Hmong women themselves. For example, the idea of "girls at home and boys at school," may still have a negative effect on both educational access as well as female economic mobility and empowerment more generally. Changing this tradition and parents' mindset related to education requires time, but serious and concrete actions must be taken to educate families and increase their awareness of the crucial impact education has for future socioeconomic opportunities.

Since the 1990s, when efforts to reduce disparities and improve educational access for minority women were implemented, changes in school infrastructure have materialized, largely due to international assistance, which have resulted in improvements in both the quality and number of trained teachers. Additionally, school curriculums that are more suitable for multiple ethnic groups have gradually been developed. Certainly, additional research needs to be conducted in order to determine the extent to which the economic conditions of Hmong and other ethnic minorities in Laos have improved, but international aid and internal co-operation have created greater opportunities.

Finally, although it may take some time before the impact of the Lao PDR government's change in policies toward education for ethnic minorities may be clearly measured; a more inclusive approach in recent decades has surely allowed some ethnic minorities to increasingly obtain various employment opportunities. If cooperation between the government and the international aid agencies continues, then ethnic minorities in general and Hmong women in particular, will likely continue to see benefits as well as improved chances for educational and economic mobility.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It means the same as Mon-Khmer.

<sup>2</sup> For the remainder, 0.7% indicates "not stated" and "others."

<sup>3</sup> *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*, (<http://www.iwgia.org/regions/asia/laos/876-update-2011-laos>) accessed January, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Hmong History: Literacy and Education* (<http://www.hmonglanguage.net/index.html>) accessed April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from ADB (2000;148).

- <sup>6</sup> MOE was renamed as the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in 2011. In this study, the documents and citations published before 2011 are noted as MOE.
- <sup>7</sup> Cited by UNDP (2001) *National Human Development Report*, Lao PDR 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> According to a staff member at the Ministry of Education and Sports, research on the education index by ethnicity has not been implemented since 2005 and the next research will be conducted in 2015 (based on an October 2014 interview by the author).
- <sup>9</sup> GERs show the rate of total enrollment (regardless of age) for the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education. Exceeding 100% is the result of overage students. Net Enrollment Rate (NER) limits the total enrollment in the theoretical age (official school age) group.
- <sup>10</sup> Similar to other developing countries, the Lao PDR has not adapted an automatic promotion system. The students, regardless of their ethnic origins, must take the examination at the end of the school year.
- <sup>11</sup> Ministry of Education (National EFA 2000 Assessment Group), 2000:79-81. Hereafter cited as (MOE, 2000).
- <sup>12</sup> Monastic education was only available to the Lao majority, and not generally to ethnic minorities.
- <sup>13</sup> Promotion of community participation in school management to increase the enrollment and retention of children, especially girls, was implemented (MOE, 2000:37-38).
- <sup>14</sup> Schools with full grades (complete primary schools) are those with grades 1–5.
- <sup>15</sup> The project had positive results. According to ADB (2008:4), the major outputs of the LABEP are as follows: (1) The design and delivery of student learning materials supplementary to the standard curriculum materials for the needs of minority children and teacher guides on the use of these supplementary materials; (2) prepared 260 trainers to provide in-service training on the effective use of these materials; (3) trained 4,112 teachers to make effective use of these materials; (4) recruit, train, and support pedagogical advisors to supervise teachers in multi-grade schools; and (5) appoint, train, and support 486 minority teachers, mainly women.
- <sup>16</sup> UNICEF is managing the programs, of which the strategies have been developed under the direction of AusAID, to raise the incentives for attending schools in the northern provinces, which have low school attendance rates among ethnic minorities and girls. In addition, a project to provide lunch in schools was conducted by the WFP along with hygiene control and teacher training (AusAID, 2009:30-31).
- <sup>17</sup> Lao Edu INFO (<http://www.dataforall.org/profiles/laoeduinfo/>) Accessed August 2015
- <sup>18</sup> There were some name changes from 1995 to 2005 census, for example, the Kor, as named in 1995, was renamed as the Akha in 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Those who have “left school” can be divided into four categories: (a) those who are above school age, and have left without completing all grades; (b) those of the same age, but have left school after completing all grades; (c) those who are still at school age and have left school with complete basic education; and (d) those of the same age who have left school with incomplete basic education. Categories (a) and (d) are considered as “dropouts” (Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing, 2007:50).
- <sup>20</sup> The remainder of 0.5% in 2005 is “no answer.”

- <sup>2 1</sup> In the matrilineal system, a husband moves in with the wife's family after marriage and the house and property belongs to their family. Thus, the wife has a relatively high status. As the family welcomes the birth of children, the wife will serve as the successor and manage the family property (Schenk-Sandbergen, *ibid*: 69). Generally, the Hmong traditionally follow the contrasting patrilineal system.
- <sup>2 2</sup> The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). There are many instances in the Programme of Action where statements are based on scientific research: For example, the statement (Paragraph 4.2) that female illiteracy is still quite important in several areas of the world, and that it deeply affects the social, economic, and political conditions of women is the result of a broad array of studies. (<http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html>) accessed April 2014.