

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

In-depth Review of Measures for Promoting the Presence and Leadership of Women and Gender Equality in Public Administration in Lao PDR

Commissioned by UN DESA and UNDP Lao PDR in collaboration with the
Ministry of Home Affairs

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2 August 2024

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPS	Champasak Province
FGD	Focus group discussion
GEPA	Gender Equality in Public Administration
HR	Human resources
LPB	Luang Prabang Province
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MoNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MoTC	Ministry of Technology and Communications
NCAWMC	National Committee for the Advancement of Women, Mother and Child
NPAGE	National Plan of Action on Gender Equality
NSDP	National Socioeconomic Development Plan
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDoAF	Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry
PDT&C	Provincial Department of Technology and Communications
PDoNRE	Provincial Department of National Resources and Environment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN Women	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
Other (in tables)	
T	Total
F	Females
M	Males
%F	Percentage of females

Executive Summary

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has committed to promoting gender equality in public administration (GEPA) because, as half of every country's population, women have the right to equal employment in their governments across all levels, sectors and positions. The Government of Lao PDR has set a target of 30 per cent of leadership positions being filled by women (equally applicable to public administration and political positions).¹ However, women remain underrepresented in decision-making in public administration in Lao PDR.

This in-depth review aims to support the Government's initiatives in promoting gender equality and the leadership of women in public administration. The review was conducted with two key objectives:

1. Support women's empowerment and strides to expand their participation and leadership in the executive branch of the State.
2. Contribute to the availability of up-to-date information on GEPA as well as evidence and analysis to facilitate informed policy- and decision-making in this field.

The review process was carried out in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Lao PDR, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and The Government of Lao PDR. Led by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), seven other government institutions participated in the review at the national (central) and local/subnational (provincial and district) levels. These institutions include:

1. Government Cabinet Office – Vientiane Capital
2. Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)
3. Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE)
4. Ministry of Technology and Communications (MoTC, formerly the Ministry of Science and Technology)
5. National Committee for the Advancement of Women, Mother and Child (NCAWMC)
6. Lao Women's Union (LWU)
7. The Provincial People's Assembly, a branch of the National Assembly (NA) based at the provincial level.

The in-depth-review focused on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions; and the objectives of Lao PDR's National Plan of Actions for Gender Equality (NPAGE) (2021–2025).² The

¹ The 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan 2021–2025, https://data.laos.opendevlopmentmekong.net/en/library_record/9th-five-year-national-socio-economic-development-plan-2021-2025/resource/34208f7e-ba9e-4a50-90e3-3632581658be

² NPAGE 2021, https://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/national_action_plan_for_gender_equality_eng.pdf

Government aims to increase the representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions within government organizations to an average of 25–30 per cent; and increase the proportion of female civil servants to 50 per cent. Specific targets for women include:

- a. Attaining 30 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the central level
- b. Achieving 20 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the provincial and Vientiane Capital level
- c. Securing 20 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the district level
- d. Ensuring 10 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the village level
- e. Reaching gender representation of 50 per cent or more among civil servants
- f. Achieving 30 per cent gender representation among members of the National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies.

Nationally, in 2022, there was a total of 175,058 civil servants in Lao PDR, of whom 83,066 (47 per cent) were female and 91,992 (53 per cent) were male. The percentage of female civil servants was 46 per cent at the central level, 44 per cent at the provincial level and 49 per cent at the district level.³ This in-depth review, however, found that the average proportion of women holding leadership positions is between 17 per cent and 18 per cent, highlighting that men hold over 80 per cent of leadership positions in the public sector in Lao PDR.

The in-depth review also revealed that GEPA in Lao PDR is often challenged by lack of a specific gender strategy and action plan to address gender parity in public services, coupled with a lack of policy frameworks to specifically address gender parity in public administration; unclear accountability mechanisms; limited capital and human resources; and obstructive social norms, especially issues related to gender-biased traditions, attitudes and practices.⁴ These challenges hinder the Government's ability to promote women's empowerment and enhance their participation and leadership in public administration at both central and subnational levels.

To address these issues and achieve its set targets, the Government has tasked MoHA with managing and enhancing the capacity of civil servants in Lao PDR. MoHA has the mandate and direct responsibility to develop policies and implement necessary measures aimed at creating conducive conditions for women to attain management and leadership positions at every level. MoHA's roles include developing technical and political professionals for management and leadership in the administrative sector; developing a gender equality policy for civil servants; and raising awareness of gender equality in politicians, managers, chiefs of villages and the general

³ MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

⁴ UNDP, 2014, *Project Brief – Gender Equality in Public Administration (GEPA)*, <https://www.undp.org/publications/project-brief-gender-equality-public-administration-gepa>

public.⁵ The Government has also designated NCAWMC as the primary committee to implement and promote gender equality and women's advancement across the country.

The main results of the review suggest that female civil servants' participation in leadership and decision-making positions is hindered by a range of constraints:

- Civil service administrative regulations and laws are written in gender-neutral language and fail to accurately identify and address gender-related gaps. Therefore, Lao PDR should promote a better understanding of the meaning and concept of gender equality and GEPA and raise awareness of national and international legal frameworks' objectives.
- In the male-dominated culture and society of Lao PDR, promoting gender equality should address gender-specific needs. Special measures and actions should be developed to promote a better understanding of theories and practices related to gender equality and empower women civil servants to exercise their equal rights – including gender equality – that are specified under various regulatory frameworks and action and implementation plans.
- Women civil servants have limited access to training and opportunities to achieve qualifications. It is imperative that the civil service create an enabling environment for women to access training and qualifications in the areas that would allow them to both improve their position and salary level and be appointed in decision-making roles, including in public administration and governance.

This in-depth review concludes that Lao PDR should develop and implement a National GEPA Action Plan that contains activities to create an enabling environment for women civil servants to actively engage in and gain access to basic needs and protections. This may include special measures targeting women civil servants during recruitment processes and capacity development; and enhancing institutional culture and work-life balance by providing facilities and services to address parental needs, among others. The National GEPA Action Plan should be a macro-level management plan with specific subnational implementation targets and key achievable indicators. The overall goal of the National GEPA Action Plan is to ensure gender equity and support the implementation of the five-year NSDP and the NPAGE in order to achieve a minimum 25–30 per cent of women at the leadership/decision-making level in public administration at both the national and subnational levels in Lao PDR with a vision to guarantee the rights of women and development of GEPA, to ensure that women civil servants can fully participate in and enjoy the benefits of staff career development and decision-making/leadership capacity-building programmes.

⁵ NPAGE 2021–2025, Chapter II: Implementation mechanisms, p. 43.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information

This report was prepared as part of the project ‘Building capacities for promoting the presence and leadership of women within public institutions at national and local levels’⁶(the Project), which is implemented by UN DESA in partnership with UNDP, the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Africa, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and UN Country Teams. The Project aims to support the development of action plans that prioritize gender equality and promote women’s career progression towards leadership positions in the public sector at national and local levels in Lao PDR, as well as Bhutan, Mauritius and Senegal. Project implementing partners include Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Zambia. As the partnering countries, engaged in peer reviewing the four countries’ action plans to prioritize GEPA at the national and local levels.

The project is supporting the development of a strategy to contribute to the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls as stipulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Goals 5 and 16. Commitments to the equal participation of women and men in public life, decision-making and policy development are also included in many international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration, and in many regional and national documents such as constitutions and legislation.

Public administration is the foundation of government and the central instrument through which national policies and programmes are implemented. The concept of public administration hinges on the principles of fairness, accountability, justice, equality and non-discrimination, and the civil service should serve as a model where women and men participate and lead equally, including in decision-making.⁷

Public administration is responsible for shaping, translating, and implementing public policy, and providing public services to citizens. Public administrators provide input on policies as they are

⁶ UN DESA project, *Building capacities for promoting the presence and leadership of women within public institutions at national and local levels*, <https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/projects/building-capacities-promoting-presence-and-leadership-women-within-public-institutions>

⁷ UNDP and University of Pittsburgh, 2021, *Gender equality in public administration report*, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ao/UNDP_AO_UPitt_2021_Gender-Equality-in-Public-Administration-EN1.pdf

formulated, decide how to structure essential government operations, and influence the substance, quality and impact of service delivery.

Ensuring that public administration is representative of its population means that a country's citizenry is broadly engaged in these important functions. Equality at all levels and in all sectors of public administration improves government function, makes governments more responsive and accountable to diverse public interests, enhances the quality of services delivered, and increases accountability, transparency, trust and confidence in public organizations.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Therefore, the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women requires a human rights-based approach to development programming.⁸ Gender equality is at the core of an inclusive and accountable public administration. As half of every country's population, women have the right to equal employment in their governments across all levels, sectors, and positions.

Unlike other sectors, public administration is the largest employer in several countries and often it is the role of the State to ensure actions are taken to specifically contribute to gender mainstreaming. GEPA has the potential to model inclusive institutions in which women and men can participate and lead equally, and to accelerate equitable development for all.⁹

Lao PDR has committed to promoting GEPA and has set a target of 25 - 30 per cent of leadership positions being filled by women (equally applicable to public administration and political positions).¹⁰ However, women remain underrepresented in decision-making in public administration in the country. The in-depth-review revealed that GEPA in Lao PDR is often challenged by a lack of policy frameworks to specifically address gender parity in public administration; unclear accountability mechanisms; limited capital and human resources (HR); and obstructive social norms, especially issues related to gender-biased traditions, attitudes, and practices.¹¹

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

The in-depth review of measures to promote the presence and leadership of women and GEPA was conducted with two key objectives:

1. Support women's empowerment and strides to expand their participation and leadership in the executive branch of the State.

⁸ UNDP Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2021, <https://undocs.org/DP/2018/21>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan 2021–2025.

¹¹ UNDP, 2014, *Project Brief – Gender Equality in Public Administration (GEPA)*, <https://www.undp.org/publications/project-brief-gender-equality-public-administration-gepa>

2. Contribute to the availability of up-to-date information on GEPA as well as evidence and analysis to facilitate informed policy- and decision-making in this field.

2. Methodology

2.1 Adapted UNDP-Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) methodology – Lao Context

The review process was carried out in collaboration with UNDP Lao PDR, UN DESA and the Government of Lao PDR. Led by MoHA, seven other government institutions participated in the review at the national (central) level and local / subnational (provincial and district) level. These institutions include:

1. Government Cabinet Office – Vientiane Capital
2. MAF
3. MoNRE
4. MoTC (formerly the Ministry of Science and Technology)
5. NCAWMC
6. LWU
7. The Provincial People's Assembly, a branch of the NA based at the provincial level.

The review team worked closely with officials from the Department of Cooperation and Planning and the Department of HR Development of MoHA on the review methodologies, site selection and selection of key interviewees.

The data collection was based on the UNDP-OECD framework¹² and an addendum provided by UN DESA as a result of a global analysis of existing laws, organizational policies and good practices that have proved effective in enhancing women's access to decision-making roles in public administration.¹³

The review included (i) focus group discussions (FGDs) with officials at different management/position levels; and (ii) individual self-assessments. The set of questions for the self-assessment was adapted to the Lao context and designed to be gender-neutral, so all participants answered the same set of questions regardless of their sex, gender, position title and background.

During the planning process, the review team was informed that due to the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and re-opening of the country, and all the pending works that were in the process of delayed implementation, most government officials – especially at senior and management levels – were occupied with various tasks and projects. The review team thus agreed that instead of conducting individual interviews/visits to each office of various line ministries/departments at the national and subnational levels, two-day workshops would be conducted in three provinces representing the northern, central, and southern parts of Lao PDR.

¹² The UNDP-OECD framework for assessing gender equality and women's leadership in public life.

¹³ UN DESA project [Building capacities for promoting the presence and leadership of women \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/en/projects/building-capacities-for-promoting-the-presence-and-leadership-of-women)

The workshops took place between late June and early July 2023. Luang Prabang Province (LPB) represented the north, Vientiane Province the centre, and Champasak Province (CPS) the south. A total of 107 targeted participants (79 women and 28 men) were invited from selected sectors, line ministries and departments at the central, provincial and district administrative levels. From each line department different levels were present: central, provincial and district. Four key position levels – a General Director, a Deputy Director, a Technician and a Head of HR Development or an Officer responsible for HR-related matters – were selected and invited to participate in the self-assessment workshop. All the participants were invited to take part in the self-assessment; however, only 72 out of 107 (67 per cent) fully completed the self-assessment process.

Table 1: Breakdown of review workshop participants

Provincial location of the workshops	# of workshop participants	# of females	# of self-assessment participants
1. Vang Vieng, Vientiane	36	26 (72%)	14
2. Pakse, CPS	31	23 (74%)	26
3. Luang Prabang, LPB	40	30 (75%)	32
Total participants	107	79 (74%)	72

FGDs were organized differently in each workshop. In the workshop at the national-level, FGDs were organized by sector: (i) MoNRE; (ii) MoHA; (iii) MAF; (iv) MoTC; (v) NCAWMC-LWU; (vi) the Government Cabinet Office and Districts. In Pakse, CPS, representing the south of the country, the FGDs were organized based on: (i) position titles; (ii) the gender directors and deputy directors; (iii) the technician; (iv) the HR Department staff; and (v) mothers / young staff. In LPB, representing the north of Lao PDR, FGDs were randomly divided into five groups. The condition was that each group had to include at least one person from each department and a balanced mix of women and men.

The sequence of review and discussions varied in each workshop due to variations in the formal protocol of each location. Nonetheless, the following five main sessions were conducted in each location:

1. **Introduction session:** Provided background information on the review and its objectives.
2. **Regulatory introduction session:** Dissemination of information on regional frameworks, the 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan (NSDP) and NPAGE, with some specific institutions' plans related to national gender equality, presented by the NCAWMC.

3. **FGD session:** The session used a set of guiding questions on issues related to GEPA specifically designed for Lao PDR. It also included discussion topics on various gender-related challenges and barriers faced by both male and female civil servants. These include but are not limited to opportunities and challenges in recruitment, career development, income and benefits, work-life balance, decision-making and social and cultural norms related to GEPA. The discussions also included how to achieve some of the key policy statements such as the gender equality indicators/targets and commitments stated in NPAGE.
4. **Self-assessment session:** Individual participants privately worked on various key gender issues based on an agreed set of questions.
5. **Group presentation session:** Each FGD group presented their discussion results and key recommendations. This session also included questions and answers from participants.

The collection of data also involved a desk review of key documents, reports, legal frameworks, action plans, good practices and guidelines. Specific official documents and sex-disaggregated statistics related to each ministry and department were collected through participating human resources development officials at the national, provincial and district levels. The review team manually converted information collected from the workshops – including FGD results, presentations, self-assessment forms and other hand-written and hard-copy information such as national policies and official sex-disaggregated statistics – into digital raw data.

The review also incorporated information from a four-day national workshop, organized under the auspices of the Project, in late October 2023. The workshop had a total of 24 participants (16 female officials) from MoHA, MoNRE, MAF, MoTC, LWU and the NCAWMC and a representative of the Gender Development Association.

2.2 Limitations

The primary limitation of the review was the incompleteness of statistical data, posing a significant challenge in the analysis and comparison of data. Some participating institutions were unable to provide the required data. For instance, although civil servant statistics at the provincial level for CPS were obtained, LPB only provided statistics for the Governor's Office, lacking provincial and/or district data.

Another limitation is related to the delay in the assessment and delivery of reports. The review – including the plan for stakeholder engagement, consultation and interviews of key government officials – was originally scheduled to be conducted between December 2022 and February 2023, followed by a regional (north, central and south) review. The draft review report was scheduled

to be completed by April/May 2023. However, as mentioned, the impact of COVID-19 and several other unforeseen circumstances delayed the review process.

Other issues include:

- i. The lack of availability of senior staff to participate in interviews and/or self-assessment because of heightened workload pressure caused by the COVID-19 lockdown.
- ii. Due to the Lao official administrative protocol, the review process could only be performed with government leadership and facilitation, so the review was postponed until the government was able to allocate time to facilitate the process.
- iii. The limited number of available MoHA staff resulted in an inability to allocate or rotate staff to assist in carrying out the review within the proposed/required timeframe.
- iv. Certain participants, particularly at the national level, were not the individuals initially targeted or requested for participation; instead, they were assigned by their respective departments.

3. Country Context

Lao PDR is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. Its topography is characterized by plateaus and mountains that cover 79 per cent of the country's total area. Administratively, Lao PDR is divided into 18 provinces, 148 districts and 8,404 villages. The population of 7.3 million is predominantly located in rural areas (63 per cent) and is relatively young, with 55 per cent under the age of 25.¹⁴

In the past few decades, Lao PDR has made significant progress in reducing the poverty rate, from almost 50 per cent in 1997 (percentage of the population living on or under US\$1.90 per day) to 10 per cent in 2018.¹⁵ In spite of this achievement, pronounced inequalities – particularly between men and women, ethnic groups and urban/rural populations – persist. Poverty mostly affects people in rural and highland areas inhabited by different ethnic groups. The country ranks 137 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index (2021), with a value of 0.613, and a Gini coefficient of 38.8¹⁶ (2018). In terms of gender equality, the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index ranked Lao PDR 54 out of 146 countries in 2023, a drop from 53 in 2022, 43 in 2021 and 36 in 2020.¹⁷

¹⁴ Lao Statistical Information Services, <https://laosis.lsb.gov.la/tblInfo/TblInfoList.do>

¹⁵ Lao PDR's poverty rate is among the highest in the region; the Vietnamese poverty rate is 1.8 per cent (2018) and that of Thailand is 0.04 per cent (2020).

¹⁶ The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Gini index of 0 represents equality, while an index of 100 implies inequality (World Bank DataBank, Metadata glossary).

¹⁷ The Global Gender Gap Report 2023, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

Lao PDR has over 50 different ethnic groups (and more than 160 subgroups) that are clustered under four ethno-linguistic families: Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-lumien. Ethnic groups in Lao PDR have diverse social structures and cultures. They are highly dependent on primary agricultural activities and natural resources for their livelihoods. The level of access to modern socioeconomic development varies from one location to another depending on the allocation of resources and support provided by the government. Each ethnic group has its own dialect,¹⁸ customs and cultural characteristics. All ethnic groups share common territory and have lived together in communities for many generations.

Table 2: A snapshot of selected socioeconomic indicators¹⁹

Indicator	Most recent value (Year)
<i>Population, total*</i>	7,379,358 (2021)
<i>Urban Population (%)</i>	37 (2021)
<i>Rural Population (%)</i>	63 (2021)
<i>Density (inhabitants/km²)*</i>	26.7 (2021)
<i>Population, male and female (%)</i>	50.1 (m), 49.9 (f) (2021)
<i>Number of households*</i>	1,315,760 (2021)
<i>GDP (current US\$)</i>	18.83 billion (2021)
<i>GDP per capita (US\$)</i>	2,551.3 (2021)
<i>Unemployment, total (% of total labour force) (modelled International Labour Organization estimate)</i>	1.3 (2021)
<i>Life expectancy at birth, total (years)</i>	68 (2020)
<i>Poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day (adjusted for purchasing power parity, 2011) (% of population)</i>	10 (2018)
<i>Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line (% of population)</i>	18.3 (2018)
<i>Gini Index</i>	38.8 (2018)
<i>Human Development Index</i>	0.613 (2021)
<i>Individuals using the Internet (% of population)</i>	34 (2020)
<i>Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)</i>	56 (2020)
<i>Fixed broadband subscriptions (per 100 people)</i>	1.76 (2020)

¹⁸ The Hmong, however, have recently developed their own written language, which is used by some in the media and communications. The written language is mostly used by Hmong United States citizens and is now slowly being taken up by some Hmong-Lao citizens.

¹⁹ World Bank Database. For indicators marked with [*], the source is the Lao Statistics Bureau (2022).

<i>Access to clean fuels and technologies for cooking (% of population)</i>	9 (2020)
<i>Children in employment, total (% of children ages 7–14)</i>	8.6 (2010)
<i>Ethnicity*</i>	50 ethnic groups
<i>Religion*</i>	Buddhism (64.7%), Ancestor Worship (31.4%), Other (3.9%)
<i>Official language*</i>	Lao

4. Public Administration

4.1 Public Institutions

Lao PDR consists of different public institutions that include but are not limited to government ministries, Party organizations, state inspectorates, national defence institutions and state enterprises, as shown in Table 3. Numerous government institutions are relatively new and therefore public administration and services have often been adjusted and modified, resulting in both a need to reallocate resources and rotation of civil servants.

The institutions that participated in the review are marked in bold-blue and some of them have also recently undergone changes. For instance, MoNRE was formed from the Water and Environment Resources Authority in 2015; and the Ministry of Science and Technology became MoTC in 2021. The Science section of this Ministry was merged with the Research Institute. The Women’s Caucus, known as the Commission’s Secretariat of the National Assembly, was dissolved in 2021 and gender-related activities have been mainstreamed into each Standing Committee and are overseen by assigned women parliamentarians within their own Committee. The NCAWMC, which used to be a stand-alone department/division within each Ministry, is now a national committee, and is both based at and a member of the LWU.

At the provincial level, the participating provinces have also undergone some changes; for instance, some areas and districts of Vientiane Province were merged with other districts from Xiengkhouang and Bolikhamxay to form Xaysomboun Province in 2016. In addition, unlike other provinces, LPB and CPS (the second and third largest provinces) have unique administrative procedures under which they have both a Provincial Governor and a Mayor, who have ‘equal’ control over public administration within their own territorial jurisdictions.

Table 3: Government institutions/organizations

No	Government Ministries	Other Agencies/ Organizations	Equivalent to Ministries
1	Ministry of Agriculture & Forestry (MAF)	The President's Office	Prime Minister's Office
2	Ministry of Finance (MoF)	The Central Party Committee	Central Government Inspection, Anticorruption
3	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)	The Central Party Propaganda Committee	Bank of Laos
4	Ministry of Health (MoH)	State Audit Agency	National Defence
5	Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)	The Central Government Cabinet Office	
6	Ministry of Justice (MoJ)	Central Party Foreign Relations Committee	
7	Ministry of Public Works and Transport (MPWT)	National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children (NCAWMC)	
8	Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICT)	The Lao National Front for Construction	
9	Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI)	Lao Women's Union (LWU)	
10	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoSLW)	The Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union (LYU)	
11	Ministry of Industry and Commerce	Lao Federation of Trade Unions	
12	Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM)	National Veterans Union	
13	MoHA	National Institute of Economic and Social Sciences	
14	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE)	National Assembly & Provincial People's Assembly	
15	Ministry of Technology & Communications (MTC)	Supreme Court	
16		People's Court	

Source: Author's compilation from MoHA Yearbook, 2022.

The central government holds robust and extensive authority. It is important to highlight that provincial governors, including mayors, share an equivalent political status with the central level and are also senior members of the Party. They have substantial autonomy in administration and implementation; therefore, provincial and district governments undertake numerous tasks directly.²⁰

4.2 Legal Frameworks on Gender Equality and Women's Advancement

Lao PDR has regulations related to social protection, health and safety, ethnic groups, and women and children. Lao PDR also periodically formulates five-year strategies to advance women and promote gender equality: the five-year Action Plans (2016–2020; 2020–2025) and the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2016–2025), and the Gender Vision 2030 align with the recent 9th NSDP as well as with SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Since Lao PDR gained its independence in 1975, it has promoted the concept of equality (unity) for all Lao citizens regardless of their background, gender and ethnicity, opportunities and capabilities.²¹ Therefore, its legal and regulatory frameworks – including laws, government instruction orders and administrative procedures – have mostly been developed with gender-neutral language to promote equality for all. The concept of equality in legal and administrative guiding documents frequently overlooks gender gaps, social diversity and the distinct needs of men and women while gender disparities persist in social, political and economic opportunities.

The current NPAGE builds on the previous plan (2016–2020) and elaborates on the Resolution of the 11th National Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the 9th NSDP (2021–2025) and the 10-Year National Strategy Plan on Gender Equality (NPAGE, 2016–2025). It consists of 11 Goals and 4 Workplans.²² It sets out specific targets for women's leadership and aims to increase the representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions within government organizations to an average of between 25 per cent and 30 per cent; and increase the proportion of female civil servants to 50 per cent. Specific targets for women include:

- a. Attaining 30 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the central level
- b. Achieving 20 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the provincial and Vientiane Capital level
- c. Securing 20 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the district level
- d. Ensuring 10 per cent or greater representation in leadership positions at the village level

²⁰ Asian Development Bank, 2021, *Completion Report: Lao People's Democratic Republic: Governance and Capacity Development in Public Sector Management Program (Subprograms 1 and 2)*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/46059/46059-001-46059-002-pcr-en.pdf>

²¹ The Lao Constitution, 2015, <https://na.gov.la/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Constitution-lao-2015.pdf>

²² See details of the 11 goals and 4 workplans in the Fourth Five-Year NPAGE (2021–2025) at <https://lao.unfpa.org/en/publications/fourth-five-year-national-plan-action-gender-equality-2021-2025>

- e. Reaching a gender representation of 50 per cent or greater among civil servants
- f. Achieving 30 per cent gender representation among members of the National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies.

4.3 Mechanisms for Promoting Women's Equality

Lao PDR has three different mechanisms to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, namely the NCAWMC, LWU and the National Assembly Women's Caucus. These three different entities have interrelated roles and responsibilities, and they work in collaboration with each other.

1. The NCAWMC is a government secretariat that supervises and leads the implementation of NPAGE by developing detailed programmes, projects and activities. One of its main tasks is to identify funding sources to complement the state budget and to ensure the implementation, management and monitoring of NPAGE and its set indicators and targets. The NCAWMC also coordinates the implementation of policies on gender equality and the eradication of discrimination against women. It implements CEDAW, promotes women's empowerment and carries out training on NPAGE for government agencies at the national and subnational levels. The role of NCAWMC includes promoting and protecting the rights and interests of women and girls across all sectors and levels.
2. The LWU is a mass organization governed by the LWU Law (2013). Its responsibilities include the prevention of and protection against any forms of violence against women, as well as ensuring that women enjoy equal rights and benefits as men. LWU is additionally entrusted with the responsibility of promoting awareness regarding policies, directions, state laws, national cultural heritage, treaties related to gender equality at the subnational level and issues concerning women from ethnic groups. The LWU is also responsible for reporting to the Central Party Committee on the status of gender equality and women's advancement, including updates on leadership positions.
3. The National Assembly Women's Caucus is made up of female Parliament members and was re-established by the National Assembly in late 2022 in the IX Legislature (2021–2025)²³ to continue mainstreaming gender equality into the law-making process; and to oversee the implementation of the Constitution, laws and policies in order to achieve the SDGs, treaties and other obligations relevant to gender equality, the advancement of

²³ Resolution No. 264/NA/2022 on Women's Parliament Caucus in the NA's IX Legislature.

women and protection of the rights of women and children.²⁴ Each standing committee of the National Assembly includes female Parliament members.

The NCAWMC performs its roles based on Article 4 of the LWU Law (2013), aimed at aiding the Government to promote the development, protection and advancement of women. It also seeks to support their participation, decision-making and equitable benefit-sharing in all development activities across Lao PDR. On 25 January 2023, the Government, through the Prime Minister's Office, also issued a Decree on the structure and areas of operation of the NCAWMC. The President of the NCAWMC is the Vice Prime Minister; the Deputy Head of NCAWMC is the President of the LWU; and the committee members are the Deputy of each Ministry and Party Organization.²⁵ The NCAWMC and LWU are assigned the primary responsibility for leading initiatives related to the advancement and protection of women. In the Decree, Chapter 3 on Organizational Structure states that:

- At the national level, NCAWMC is a government secretariat and has its main office based at the LWU
- At the ministerial level and equivalent, the NCAWMC has Divisions of its own to perform its roles and responsibilities based on law and policies
- At the provincial level, the Division of NCAWMC is a secretariat and performs associated duties
- At the district level, the NCAWMC Unit serves as the secretariat and carries out its responsibilities.²⁶

4.4 Management of Civil Servants

Article 87 of the Law on Civil Servants (2015)²⁷ states that MoHA has the overall right and responsibility to manage civil servants in Lao PDR up to the level of deputy heads of departments and deputy heads of organizations. Civil servants at the level of head of department, head of government agency/organization and above are overseen by the Central Party Committee.

Most public administration and management systems are centralized. Line ministries and MoHA face significant administrative constraints which may impact their capacity to promote GEPA and women's advancement, especially at the subnational level. Formulating the necessary regulations and measures to create an environment conducive to women securing managerial and leadership roles across various levels appears challenging. Policymaking and implementation of policies

²⁴ LWU, 2019, *National Review of Lao People's Democratic Republic Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and Adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform (BPfA+25)*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Lao%20PDR.pdf>

²⁵ Decree on the Structure and Operation of the NCAWMC, 2023, No 19/PM.

²⁶ Decree on the Structure and Operation of NCAWMC, No. 19/PM, dated 25 January 2023.

²⁷ Law on Civil Servants, 2015, No 74/NA.

related to the management of civil servants are concentrated at the central government level, and the political apparatus is also centralized.

NPAGE²⁸ designates NCAWMC as the primary committee for the implementation and promotion of gender equality and women's advancement, while MoHA is directly responsible for developing policies and providing necessary measures to create conditions for women to obtain management and leadership positions at each level. MoHA's roles include developing professionals for management and leadership in the administrative sectors, developing gender equality policy for civil servants, and raising awareness on gender equality for politicians, managers, chiefs of villages and the public.²⁹

However, in practice, as previously noted, the lack of a specific gender strategy and action plan to address gender parity in public services – coupled with an unclear accountability mechanism, limited qualified human resources and capacity, insufficient civil service remuneration and an underperforming civil service – compromises the effectiveness of MoHA, along with other public sector institutions.³⁰ This limits the Ministry's capacity to promote women's empowerment and enhance their participation and leadership in public administration at both central and subnational levels.

4.5 Women Civil Servants – Central and Subnational Levels

According to the MoHA Statistics Yearbook, in 2022 there were a total of 175,058 civil servants in Lao PDR, of whom 83,066 (47 per cent) were female officials and 91,992 (53 per cent) were male. In 2022, the percentage of female civil servants was 46 per cent at the central level, 44 per cent at the provincial level and 49 per cent at the district level.

Table 4: Total number and percentage of civil servants, disaggregated by level and gender³¹

	Total	Female	Male	% of women
Total	175,058	83,066	91,992	47%
National Level	25,439	11,637	13,802	46%
Provincial Level	35,913	15,723	20,190	44%
District Level	113,706	55,706	58,000	49%

Source: MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

²⁸ NPAGE, page 43.

²⁹ NPAGE 2021–2025, Chapter II: Implementation mechanisms, page 43.

³⁰ Asian Development Bank, 2021, *Completion Report: Lao People's Democratic Republic: Governance and Capacity Development in Public Sector Management Program (Subprograms 1 and 2)*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/46059/46059-001-46059-002-pcr-en.pdf>

³¹ MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

When examining civil servants in each selected institution at the **central level**, Table 5 shows that the percentage of female civil servants varies by sector. However, as indicated in Table 4, the overall percentage of women civil servants is slightly lower than that of men. Table 5 shows that institutions responsible for public health and education tend to have a slightly higher proportion of women civil servants (65 and 52 per cent in 2022, respectively). Meanwhile, institutions related to civil engineering such as public transport, and energy and mines have much lower percentages of women civil servants (23 and 25 per cent, respectively). The share of female civil servants is also relatively low in agriculture and forestry and natural resources management (29 and 31 per cent, respectively).

Table 5 also reveals that in certain institutions, the proportion of women civil servants has decreased by approximately 1 and 2 percentage points according to comparable databases from the Lao Statistics Bureau in 2021 and MoHA in 2022. The exception to this trend is the sharp decline in women civil servants in the Bank of Lao, a State Enterprise, which reduced from 55 per cent in 2021 to 41 per cent in 2022. Overall, a slight decline in the percentage of women civil servants can be observed in 2022 compared to 2021:

- From 53 to 52 per cent in MoES
- From 32 to 31 per cent in the Ministry of Industry and Commerce
- From 32 to 31 per cent in MoNRE
- From 41 to 40 per cent in MoTC
- From 35 to 33 per cent in the Central Government

Table 5: Percentage of women civil servants in selected government institutions, 2021 and 2022³²

Government institutions		Percentage of women civil servants	
		2021 ³³	2022 ³⁴
Above ministry level			
1	Prime Minister's Office (Government Office)	38	38
2	Central government	48	48
Selected line ministries			
1	MAF	29	29
2	Ministry of Finance	34	34
3	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	35	35
4	Ministry of Health	66	65
5	Ministry of Education and Sports	53	52
6	Ministry of Justice	37	37

³² Sex-disaggregated statistical data provided by MoHA and other government agencies often contains only the total number and either the number or the percentage of females. It does not contain the number or percentage of males.

³³ Sourced from Lao Statistics Bureau, data from 2017–2021, <https://laosis.lsb.gov.la/tblInfo/TblInfoList.do>

³⁴ MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

7	Ministry of Public Works and Transport	23	23
8	Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism	42	42
9	Ministry of Planning and Investment	34	34
10	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	39	38
11	Ministry of Industry and Commerce	32	31
12	Ministry of Energy and Mines	25	25
13	Ministry of Home Affairs	39	39
14	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment	32	31
15	Ministry of Technology and Communications	41	40
Selected other institutions, equivalent to ministry level			
1	Central Government Inspection Agency	35	33
2	Bank of Laos	55	41
3	National Assembly	43	42
4	People's Court	38	36
5	Supreme Court	37	37
6	LWU	84	84

Source: Author's compilation.

At the subnational level, the percentage of women civil servants is generally higher than at the central level. Table 6 aggregates civil servants' statistics that include data for each province combined with its districts (total civil servants in the province). A province may consist of 5–15 districts, depending on its population and geographical area. Similarly, to the central level, the percentage of women civil servants in some provinces has declined over time. This is the case in Oudomxay, LPB, Xiengkhuang, Bolikhamxay and Attapeu. The reasons for the slight decrease in some provinces include the restructuring of some institutions, routine staff turnover, reallocation of staff to other sites, staff leaving for higher education/training and/or technical improvement,³⁵ as well as staff retirement and public budget cuts. The data indicates that provinces with a decline in the percentage of women civil servants experienced a decrease of between 1 and 2 percentage points. Conversely, those provinces with an increase witnessed a rise ranging from 1 to 8 percentage points (Vientiane and Phongsaly, respectively).

Table 6: Percentage of women civil servants at the subnational level

Province		2021 (% of female officials)	2022 (% of female officials)
1	Vientiane Capital	46	47
2	Phongsaly	37	45
3	Luangnamtha	39	40
4	Oudomxay	42	37
5	Bokeo	41	44

³⁵ This includes cases where civil servants leave to obtain a higher education level, training, etc. at their own expense.

6	Luang Prabang	43	40
7	Huaphanh	39	42
8	Xayaboury	42	43
9	Xiengkhuang	49	43
10	Vientiane	45	50
11	Bolikhamxay	47	46
12	Khammuane	44	47
13	Savannakhet	44	46
14	Saravane	41	44
15	Sekong	41	42
16	Champasak	42	43
17	Attapeu	46	44
18	Xaysomboun	34	34

Source: Author's compilation data from Lao Statistic Bureau, data from 2017–2021 and MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

The analysis additionally assesses the distribution of male and female civil servants in four provincial departments from CPS and LPB that took part in the review. These include the Provincial Department of National Resources and Environment (PDoNRE); Provincial Department of Home Affairs; Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry (PDoAF); and Provincial Department of Technology and Communications (PDT&C). Table 7 shows that the percentage of women civil servants in these Departments in CPS and LPB is relatively low compared with that of men. These statistics are consistent with the figures for the national level, which show that there are far fewer women civil servants in the natural resources and forestry sectors. While some Departments, such as PDT&C, have gradually increased the number of female civil servants over time, most Departments appear to face challenges in enhancing the participation of female civil servants. These include PDoNRE and PDoAF in both provinces.

Table 7 shows that some of these Departments have a low number of women civil servants. For instance, the Government Office in CPS and PDoAF in both provinces have only 23 per cent women staff members. They may therefore need to increase their efforts to engage women in the public sector in order to achieve the gender balance target of 50 per cent by 2025. Nonetheless, the review team was informed by the Head of the human resources Unit of the Governor's Office in

CPS that, on average, CPS has already reached the gender balance target of 50 per cent³⁶ due to the efforts of the provincial government offices targeting women for their new recruits, especially at the district level.

Table 7: Percentage of women civil servants in Departments that participated in the review

Percentage of Female Civil Servants – CPS Province												
	PDoNRE			PDoAF			PDoNRE			PDT&C		
Year	Total	F	%	Total	F	%	Total	F	%	Total	F	%
2016	30	10	33%	637	148	23%	112	43	38%	29	12	41%
2017	32	10	31%	723	181	25%	111	42	38%	31	13	42%
2018	31	12	39%	695	177	25%	109	42	39%	28	11	39%
2019	34	11	32%	736	176	24%	109	41	38%	28	11	39%
2020	34	11	32%	658	176	27%	110	41	37%	30	13	43%
2021	33	12	36%	646	171	26%	106	41	39%	31	14	45%
2022	32	13	41%	624	170	27%	107	40	37%	44	20	45%
2023	33	14	42%	619	169	27%	106	39	37%	44	19	43%
Percentage of Female Civil Servants – LPB Province												
	Governor's Office			PDoAF			PDoNRE			PDT&C		
Year	Total	F	%	Total	F	%	Total	F	%	Total	F	%
2016	98	26	27%	181	43	24%	78	23	29%	28	9	32%
2017	98	26	27%	181	43	24%	82	24	29%	27	9	33%
2018	103	29	28%	182	43	24%	76	28	37%	25	8	32%
2019	94	27	29%	180	43	24%	78	27	35%	24	7	29%
2020	101	29	29%	174	41	24%	80	28	35%	24	7	29%
2021	97	28	29%	178	40	22%	82	28	34%	37	16	43%
2022	99	29	29%	178	41	23%	84	30	36%	36	15	42%
2023	109	31	28%	168	39	23%	84	30	36%	35	14	40%

Source: Author's elaboration of data provided by the HR departments of participating districts – June–July 2023.

4.6 Women Civil Servants in Leadership Positions

According to a report from the LWU to the Central Party Committee on the status of women in senior leadership positions (Report III, 14 November 2022), there were:

- 29 Ministers and equivalent, seven of whom were women (21 per cent)
- 104 Vice Ministers or equivalent, of whom 24 were women (23 per cent)
- Six Assistant Ministers, with two being women (33 per cent)
- 582 Directors General or equivalent, of whom 110 were women (19 per cent)
- 416 Chief Military officers, including six women (1 per cent)
- 154 Chiefs of Police, with six being women (4 per cent).

³⁶ However, the number provided is inconsistent with data from the Lao Statistics Bureau and MoHA, and the actual number/percentage of female civil servants reported by the CPS Governor's Office to MoHA and the Lao Statistics Bureau.

Similarly, according to information presented in the 9th NSDP, the proportion of women in leadership and management positions at the ministerial level was 18 per cent in 2019; the proportion at the Director General and Deputy Director General level was 22 per cent. However, during the same year, the percentage of women occupying positions at the level of Provincial Governor or Deputy Governor was 5 per cent, and at the level of District Governor and Deputy Governor it was 7 per cent.

At the subnational level, there were a total of:

- 18 Provincial Governors or Mayors, with no female officials
- 36 Deputy Governors/Deputy Mayors, with four being women (8 per cent)
- 148 District Governors, including three women (2 per cent)
- 8,406 Village Chiefs, with 269 being women (3 per cent)

Current statistics provided by MoHA also indicate that the average proportion of women holding leadership positions is between 17 and 18 per cent, highlighting that men hold over 80 per cent of leadership positions in the public sector in Lao PDR.

As an example, PDoAF 2021 data in Bolikhamxay Province shows that only two of the total 37 leadership and management positions across the entire province were held by women. Notably, these positions were limited to the role of Head of Unit, which represents the lowest level within the administrative hierarchy. No woman held a leadership position in any of the seven districts of Bolikhamxay Province.³⁷ Again, this underscores the fact that although the percentage of female civil servants is almost equal to that of men, women are rarely in leadership positions and are therefore underrepresented in decision-making, particularly at the local and subnational levels.

5. Challenges in Promoting Gender Equality in Public Administration

While positive trends are evident in engaging women civil servants, whose number has steadily increased over the years in the public service, data shows that the representation of women in leadership positions, across all levels but particularly at the subnational level, remains low. The following sections describe the main challenges, barriers and gaps that women face in taking up leadership positions.

MoHA's Strategy on Civil Servants' Management 2030³⁸ was developed to continue to implement the government's vision for HR development. This Strategy highlights the challenges and gaps by acknowledging the low representation of women civil servants in leadership and management roles. Additionally, it emphasizes the absence of data on ethnic groups and disadvantaged civil

³⁷ Gender assessment conducted by the consultant in early December 2022.

³⁸ MoHA verbally reported at the National Workshop 23–27 October 2023 that the Strategy was endorsed by the government in September 2023. A draft Strategy (unsigned) was shared during the Workshop discussion.

servants. The Strategy emphasizes the need for tailored conditions, addressing not only gender disparity but also recognizing intersectionality, which encompasses ethnic groups and disadvantaged female civil servants.

Regarding GEPA, the Strategy outlines three key challenges:

1. Sectors lacking a detailed implementation plan and goals (indicators), particularly in the context of promoting GEPA
2. Unclear roles and responsibilities of sectors regarding GEPA
3. Women civil servants' limited access to information and opportunities for training, specifically in areas related to leadership and public administration skills.

Similarly, the LWU report to the Central Party Committee, of November 2022, includes five key challenges:³⁹

1. Some women still lack the initiative to invest in self-improvement, and often still believe they need to conform to traditional and cultural norms
2. The progression of women leaders is hindered by age constraints for senior and mid-career staff, as well as limited experience for younger staff
3. Plans for women's career development from some ministries, are incomplete, fragmented or discontinued
4. LWU's limited experience in some sectors and in management skills in general, limiting its ability to develop a plan
5. Social and family constraints on women's career development.

The issues identified by both MoHA and the LWU were also discussed during the review and consultation workshops held in preparation for this review. The next sections address the identified GEPA issues, categorized under the following headings: (i) Implementation of gender equality strategies and NPAGE; (ii) coordination and accountability mechanisms; (iii) HR and women's career development; (iv) institutional culture and work-life balance; and (v) evidence-based analysis, data management and measurable indicators.

5.1 Implementation of Gender Equality Strategies and NPAGE

Lao PDR still does not have an approved plan developed specifically to promote gender equality in public administration. Also, the absence of sectoral gender equality implementation plans, along with the lack of guidelines for achieving the government's target of elevating the representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions in the public sector to between 25 per cent and 30 per cent on average, poses challenges for MoHA, the NCAWMC and

³⁹ Note: the information is directly translated from the LWU's official report to the Central Party Committee on 14 November 2022.

LWU in monitoring the progress of NPAGE implementation. This includes tracking the number of women in various positions at both national and subnational levels.

Without a specific sectoral gender strategy, most government institutions integrate the dissemination of NPAGE (not its implementation) into their own technical action/implementation plans. However, most civil servants, especially at the subnational level, have not yet benefited from the dissemination of NPAGE. This was confirmed by the participants at the review and national workshops. Technical and human resources development staff, in particular, reported in their FGDs and self-assessment that they were unaware of policies related to gender equality beyond hearing of and/or being aware that there is a national gender equality strategy. Many reported not knowing either its substance or how to implement gender-related policies.

With the exception of participants from the NCAWMC, LWU and some senior management staff, almost all participants stated that they were exposed to or had heard of NPAGE for the first time at the workshop. The weak implementation of NPAGE and other gender-equality-related activities is mainly due to: (i) lack of financial resources; (ii) unclear roles and responsibilities; and (iii) insufficient reporting mechanisms of different agencies. The issue is exacerbated by limited knowledge and understanding about gender equality and cultural norms.

According to the NCAWMC, the major challenge arising from the absence of concrete measures for GEPA and sectoral implementation strategies is the inability to access gender data beyond the percentage of men and women in each ministry at the national level and department at the subnational level. Public agencies also have difficulties ensuring gender-equitable distribution of resources and opportunities and are unable to allocate resources to address gender inequality in the public sector.

Consequently, under the 9th NSDP's implementation instructions, the government urges every ministry to develop its own gender implementation strategy to complement the set of 11 Goals and follow the four main National Gender Workplans.⁴⁰ The NCAWMC reports that line ministries have limited capacity and knowledge to develop a gender strategy and they rely heavily on external gender experts for advice and to develop strategies and action plans.

With assistance from international development partners, a few ministries (MAF, MoNRE, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Public Works and Transport, MoES)⁴¹ have developed their own gender

⁴⁰ The four National Gender Workplans are: Workplan 1: Disseminate, raise awareness on gender equality and develop a database system; Workplan 2: Promote and establish gender equality; Workplan 3: Draft, review and amend policies and legislation, and implement regional and international obligations under treaties and declarations to which Lao PDR is a party; and Workplan 4: Strengthen the organizational structures and personnel responsible for gender equality.

⁴¹ The Gender Action Plan of MoES was developed in 2022, MAF's in 2023.

action strategies to address sectoral priority development objectives. However, these strategies were not developed to address GEPA specifically.

For instance, the MoES gender strategy aims to address gender balance by improving the enrolment rates of female students at all educational levels. MAF's gender strategy aims at engaging women in agricultural activities, including agricultural enterprises; MoNRE's gender strategy sets a goal for 70 per cent of its staff to be aware of NPAGE and participate in dissemination workshops.

However, it is important to note that, although MAF and MoNRE have their gender strategies, most of their staff at the subnational level who participated in the workshops were not yet aware of those plans. They reported that they have not yet joined a gender-related workshop within their respective institution. This was also confirmed by the MoNRE senior management responsible for overseeing gender equality aspects, who stated that they have not yet fully disseminated gender policies to the subnational level due to limited suitable human capacity and financial resources.⁴²

Other institutions, such as MoHA and MoTC, also share the view that their staff have not yet received gender training due to limited resources. Nonetheless, all self-assessment and workshop participants agreed that a specific and detailed GEPA action plan is needed to enhance accountability and monitoring within agreed timelines.

5.2 Coordination and Accountability Mechanisms

Although sectoral roles and responsibilities are outlined in NPAGE, the review found a lack of clarity on coordination and accountability mechanisms. This is because NPAGE does not indicate how the NCAWMC, LWU and MoHA should coordinate their respective roles and how they should interact with other entities like the Lao Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Planning, etc. This may be because most civil servants are still unaware of the coordination arrangement stated in the 9th NSDP and NPAGE, due to not being exposed to and/or not receiving training and/or not participating in dissemination workshops.

The review found that most participants were unclear on whether the NCAWMC, LWU, or MoHA would take the leading role in developing GEPA-specific strategies and/or take the lead on coordinating data collection. They were confused because the NCAWMC, which plays an important role nationally in implementing the national action plan and is a secretariat of the government, has been relocated from the Prime Minister's Office to the LWU. At the subnational level, provinces rely on LWU offices to collect and analyse data. Participants also reiterated the need for improved coordination between national and subnational levels of government.

⁴² The budget allocated for the implementation of these action plans, including hosting a dissemination workshop, is in Lao kip. The current high inflation rate makes it harder for MoNRE to fully implement its action plan.

In terms of accountability, a monitoring and evaluation system with targeted indicators should be in place. Some participants recommended having 30 or 35 per cent of women in leadership positions in the civil service, with a focus on specific sectors in which women are underrepresented. The law on civil service management should also be improved to enhance the oversight and monitoring functions and increase transparency and access to information, and the participation and leadership of women in the civil service, especially at the subnational level.

At the macro level, policy improvements need to be made by the Party, LWU and MoHA to improve accountability mechanisms and ensure that policies integrate specific targets such as hiring, career development or promotion targets for gender equality and women leadership into annual staff performance reviews. For gender equality performance improvement and feedback, an annual employee survey can provide important insights into the effectiveness of promoting gender equality. Regular reporting on gender issues can improve accountability and offer opportunities to revise gender equality strategies to potentially improve gender outcomes.⁴³

The Department of Organization and HR Development in MoHA should be responsible for the development, finalization, implementation and monitoring of an action plan, aimed at attaining a higher representation of women in leadership positions across the public sector. The National Political and Public Institution Organization should be engaged in providing political theory training for female civil servants because such training is key for career advancement.

5.3 Human Resources Policies and Career Development

In 2016, Lao PDR formulated the 2025 National HR Development Strategy⁴⁴ which contains no policies, measures, or actions towards the promotion of GEPA. The HR system encompasses recruitment, promotion, career and staff development, among other elements. Implementation of the Strategy is assigned to all human resources departments of government line agencies.

Recruitment processes⁴⁵ do not include any special measures for women. Nonetheless, workshop participants believed that there is no gender gap in the recruitment process in the public sector

⁴³ OECD, 2023, *Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality*, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/07/toolkit-for-mainstreaming-and-implementing-gender-equality-2023_c68bd819.html#:~:text=The%20Toolkit%20for%20Mainstreaming%20and,Gender%20Equality%20in%20Public%20Life.

⁴⁴ *National Human Resource Development Strategy to 2025*, No. 95/Government of Lao PDR, Vientiane Capital, dated 26 April 2016. The strategy was guided by the following vision statement, Vision to 2030: “Developing human resources to be a strong production power that could respond to the sustainable socioeconomic development as directing to industrialization and modernization, being able to integrate and compete with regional and international counterparts with quantity and quality, enables the population to access to overall social services and upgrades betterment of living conditions.”

⁴⁵ For recruitment, Article 17 of the Law on Civil Servants states that a person recruited as a new civil servant must meet the following conditions:

- Be a Lao citizen by birth or have been a Lao citizen for more than three years
- Be 18 years old or older
- Be proven to be a good citizen, have good qualities, and be loyal to the people's democratic regime
- Never have been convicted of any crime, or been disciplined or expelled by any organization

because candidates begin with an exam, which is organized by MoHA. They recognize that entry exams are very competitive and posts are limited due to insufficient budget and limited staff quotas. As a result, many young people, often women, especially those from rural areas, volunteer to carry out unpaid work in the civil service while hoping for future opportunities.⁴⁶

Some participants expressed the perspective that, while numerous aspects of public service have witnessed considerable improvement, women continue to encounter obstacles in advancing their careers and securing promotions. According to the Law on Civil Servants, Articles 15 and 40, promotions of civil servants are determined by set criteria – political qualities and revolutionary moral qualities; educational qualifications, knowledge, skills and experience; and success in performing duties and delivering work.

However, the focus group discussions revealed that the criteria and conditions for promotion are very intricate in reality. Participants all said that the length of previous assignments has little influence on career advancement. The promotion process involves volunteering, self-evaluation, nominations by work colleagues, institutional performance reviews and evaluations by senior management. In some instances, nominations for promotion can be linked to the attainment of outstanding results, including identifying or obtaining sources of additional finance. Continuous attendance and delivery of work, even after working hours and for tasks unrelated to official assignments, are also important factors. For instance, a young woman who works in a male-dominated office noted that attending after-work activities is considered as ‘participation’ in the team. This poses a problem for women who have family duties and responsibilities.

Performance reviews can involve various methods, which include:

- Confidential provision of grades by supervisors and work colleagues
- Open performance review, in which colleagues and supervisors vote during a performance review meeting
- Recommendation from a supervisor as a result of outstanding performance

While some participants noted that the results of performance reviews play a crucial role in elevating a civil servant’s rank, others suggested that a staff member may rise through the ranks

-
- Have a clear personal and family activity history
 - Have specialized vocational education or higher education that is in line with the position being applied for
 - Be in good health.

⁴⁶ While some individuals succeed in securing a paid position within 3–5 years, many end up working voluntarily, *without salary*, for a period ranging from three to seven years before eventually discontinuing their voluntary work.

for reasons that are only partially related to performance reviews.⁴⁷ In particular, additional prerequisites for promotion of a woman civil servant include:

- Full compliance with and being a member of required unions and Party organizations
- Compliance with the LWU slogan for *three goods*:
 - i. a good citizen
 - ii. a good wife
 - iii. a good mother

And two duties:

- i. the duty to defend and construct the nation
- ii. the duty to emancipate women⁴⁸

It should be noted that many women civil servants are confused about the interpretation of the *three goods*; for instance, some suggested that being a good citizen means that a female civil servant should never question her assigned tasks and lack of career progression.

Some participants, especially from the subnational level, were of the view that many women civil servants often do not take the initiative to apply for promotion or take a leading position. This is because of fear of extra burdens and responsibilities, and of perception of the need to take additional steps to meet the required prerequisites. Others said that other staff members, including female staff, often prefer not to have a woman as a leader. Some senior participants, both female and male, said that even though an institution may target women for promotion, their female colleagues often vote against them, and instead vote for male colleagues.

Several female participants also raised parental leave as a major obstacle to their career development and promotion. For male civil servants, who have 15 days of parental leave, this does not affect their attendance at work. For female civil servants, on the other hand, using their legal allocation of up to seven months of maternity leave (five months for a natural birth, six months for a caesarean delivery and seven months for giving birth to twins) would negatively affect their

⁴⁷ See also Barma, N.H. & Orac, J., 2014, *Tailoring Civil Service Pay Analysis and Advice to Context Challenges, Approaches, and the Case of Lao PDR*, Policy Research Paper, World Bank, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/261461468278661718/pdf/WPS6744.pdf>

⁴⁸ According to Khouangvichit. D, 2010, *Socio-Economic Transformation and Gender Relations in Lao PDR*, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Umeå Sweden: "During the First congress of LWU in 1984, the slogan 'three goods and two duties' was adopted in order to shape an ideal or model of a good woman. To be a good citizen means that a woman must study, follow and implement the party's policy, enhance solidarity with all of Laos's ethnic groups, and love the country. A good wife should build a new socialist family. She must be faithful to her husband and help him to overcome all difficulties. She should provide opportunities for her husband to study and work, applaud the husband when he has success, and dare to discuss with the husband when he makes faults. She must learn how to weave, do embroidery and keep the house clean. To be a good mother, she should be a good caregiver for her children, and encourage her children to study to ensure them to become good citizens in the future."

career development. Often when women are on maternity leave, they are not only excluded from the staff annual review but also risk losing their position.⁴⁹

The law⁵⁰ states that staff members who take sick leave of more than three months will lose their subsidy and be replaced by other staff so that the work can continue. In these circumstances, when a civil servant who has taken maternity, miscarriage, or sick leave returns to work, she remains at the same or even lower rank due to absence and resulting inability to deliver work. Some women said they remained at the same level for several years after having had children. Another important factor in promotion is the status of being a member of a Party.⁵¹ As Table 10 shows, only a handful of female civil servants are Party members, especially at the subnational level.

Statistical records indicate that education levels play a critical role in both promotion and salary raises.⁵² Table 8 compares the level of education reached by male and female civil servants in 2021 and 2022.⁵³ While the proportions of women and men holding bachelor's degrees, advanced diplomas, diplomas and associate diplomas show minimal variation, it is important to highlight that the number of male civil servants with master's or PhD degrees surpasses that of their female counterparts.

Table 8: Education level of all civil servants, Lao PDR, 2021 and 2022

Education Level	2021 ⁵⁴					2022 ⁵⁵				
	Total	Female	% Female	Male	% Male	Total	Female	% Female	Male	% Male
PhD	616	103	17	513	83	1,157	344	30	813	70
Post Master's degree	567	244	43	323	57	132	52	39	80	61
Master's degree	10,549	3,061	29	7,488	71	11,663	3,561	31	8,102	69

⁴⁹ The Decree on Technical Position of the Civil Servants (2017), Chapter 5 on Recruitment and Termination of Subsidy for Technical Position, Article 14, states that a civil servant with a technical position who is absent due to study or improving their technical skills elsewhere for six months or more or is unable to perform his/her duties due to health problems or other reasons for three months or more, will not receive the subsidy for the technical position. The fact that maternity leave is not exempted from Article 14 may negatively affect the compensation received by women public servants.

⁵⁰ Law on Civil Servants (2015), Article 28, point 5 and Decree on Technical Position of the Civil Servants (2017), Chapter 5 on Recruitment and Termination of Subsidy for Technical Position, Article 14.

⁵¹ The Party, or Lao People's Revolutionary Party, is the founding and sole ruling political party of the Lao PDR. The Party's monopoly on state power is guaranteed by Article 3 of the Constitution of Laos, and it maintains a unitary state with centralized control over the economy and military.

⁵² This was also discussed in a World Bank Policy Research working paper and the Asian Development Bank Validation report on Lao PDR's Governance and Capacity Development in Public Sector Management Program (Subprograms 1 and 2).

⁵³ Although the Lao PDR education system encourages both boys and girls to attend school, some local traditional cultures do not encourage the active participation of women, with a negative influence on the level of confidence of girls and women. This is reflected at the community level, where leadership positions are dominated by men. Women typically shoulder more household and familial responsibilities compared to men.

⁵⁴ Sourced from Lao Statistic Bureau, data from 2017–2021, <https://laosis.lsb.gov.la/tblInfo/TblInfoList.do>

⁵⁵ Sourced from MoHA Yearbook 2022.

Post-Bachelor's degree	292	139	48	153	52	168	76	45	92	55
Bachelor's degree	60,539	24,913	41	35,626	59	61,101	25,394	42	35,707	58
Advanced diploma	62,004	31,635	51	30,369	49	61,644	31,721	51	29,923	49
Diploma	34,918	19,734	57	15,184	43	33,007	18,828	57	14,179	43
Associate diploma	6,062	3,069	51	2,993	49	5,616	2,901	52	2,715	48
No degree	604	204	34	400	66	570	189	33	381	67

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 9: Education, position and salary level of senior management

Academic and/or Political Education Level	Total Salary level 6			Salary Scales of the Senior Leader Positions-Government Ministries													
				1			2			3		4		5		6	
	Total	F	%F	T	F	%F	T	F	%F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F
	253	46	18%	188	36	19%	63	8	13%	1	1	1	1				
Ph.D	39	5		20	4		18			1	1						
Master Degree	162	34		127	26		34	7				1	1				
Bachelor Degree	34	6		26	5		8	1									
Advanced Diploma	15			12			3										
Mid-Level Diploma	3	1		3	1												
Foundation																	
Other Agencies Equivalent to Ministries																	
	Total	F	%F	T	F	%F	T	F	%F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F
Total	72	12	17%	51	10	19%	21	2	9%								
Ph.D	15	1		8	1		7										
Master Degree	53	11		40	9		13	2									
Bachelor Degree	4			3			1										
Advanced Diploma																	
Mid-Level Diploma																	
Foundation																	

Source: MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

Opportunities for promotion are also heavily determined by access to political or leadership training. Training courses are designed specifically for civil servants to upgrade their public administration skills. Opportunities to receive technical training or capacity-building are rare, especially political and leadership training, and particularly at the lower and subnational levels. Institutions often rely heavily on external support from development partners as well as their own staff's individual ability to upgrade their own education and technical skills.

Professional development criteria⁵⁶ require not only good performance but also continuous attendance at least in the previous two years. These requirements may profoundly hinder training

⁵⁶ In terms of civil servants' career development, Article 22 of the Law on Civil Servants outlines the criteria for selecting staff for development, which include the following conditions:

- Must be aligned with an indicated/approved human development plan
- Must be a full-time employee with a continuous two-year work service record

opportunities for women who take maternity leave. Despite some progress, the number of women civil servants who accessed training in 2020 was significantly lower than their male counterparts, constituting only 2,130 (39 per cent female) of the total 5,420 civil servants who received public management training. Table 9 shows that only a few women have had the opportunity to attend such trainings, especially at the subnational level.

Table 10 suggests that women, especially at subnational level, do not have the same opportunities as men to attend available leadership trainings. This may have a negative impact on women's ability to take up leadership positions. For example, analysis of PDoAF data in Bolikhamxay Province shows a total of 215 government officials (88 women or 40 per cent, and 127 men or 60 per cent) accessed such training.

Participants in the review workshops in June–July and the national workshop in October 2023 recognized that women encounter greater challenges and barriers when it comes to accessing the education and training essential for advancing their careers. Participants suggested that career progression is constrained by factors such as parenthood, compounded with lack of educational and training opportunities, particularly affecting women in remote and rural areas.

Finally, several participants referred to the need for a mindset shift from negative stereotypes, and greater awareness among men as well as their acceptance of having women in leadership positions. They also emphasized the need to change the policy around parental leave to improve outcomes.

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- iii. Capacity-building/training attended must be in line with current duties and responsibilities
 - iv. Must be less than 35 years old to pursue a bachelor's degree, less than 40 to pursue a master's degree, and less than 50 to pursue a PhD
 - v. Must have a performance record at the rank of good or above
 - vi. Have permission from their organization.

Table 10: Factors affecting the career development of women in participating institutions

Content	Ministry Level						Champasak (CPS) Province												Luang Prabang (LPB) Province											
	MoCT Central			MoNRE-Central			Total Civil Servants-CPS			PoNRE-CPS			Com & Tech-CPS			Agriculture&Forestry-CPS			Governor Office LPB			Home Affairs-LPB			People Assessby-LPB			Com & Tech-LPB		
	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F	Total	F	%of F
Leadership Training and Politics-Governance																														
Political Theory/Governance 45 days	261	142	54%	153	47	31%	172	50	29%	5	0	0%				5	2	40%	0	0	0%							16	7	44%
Pollical Theory/Governance-Higher Level	71	19	27%	14	4	29%	228	41	18%	14	5	36%	4	1	25%	19	2	11%	3	2	67%	5	1	20%	8	1	20%	3		
Theory of politics/Governance -Mid-Level				3	1	33%	419	81	19%	13	4	31%				1	0	0%				3	0		2	1	33%			
Theory of politics/Governance-Lower Level				4	2	50%	777	122	16%	30	21	70%				17	2	12%							3	3	100%	2	1	50%
Education/Technical Skills																														
Bachelor's degree	10	2	20%	22	21	95%	46	3	7%	71	28	39%	30	14	47%	259	68	26%	4	0	0%	25	9	36%	8	4	50%	24	9	37%
Master's degree	207	72	35%	130	33	25%	27	2	8%	8	2	25%	9	3	33%	2	0	0%	2	0	0%	5	0	0%	3	1	33%	1	0	0%
Ph.D	387	181	47%	3	0	0%	4	1	25%	2	0	0%				2	0	0%							2	0	0%			
Leadership Position																														
Minister	1	0	0%	1	0	0%																								
Vice-Minister	4	0	0%	3	1	33%																								
General Director	15	1	7%	13	3	23%																								
Deputy Director	70	14	20%	43	7	16%																								
Head of Division	47	18	38%	75	10	13%	29	4	14%							1	0	50%							1	0	0%	1	0	0%
Deputy Division	60	36	60%	138	49	36%	101	10	10%							4	0	0%	3	1	33%	2	1	50%	2	0	0%	2	0	0%
Party Member																														
National Party Congress	1	0	0%	1	0	0%													1	0	0%									
Standing Committee Member	7	0	0%	4	1	25%																								
Party Committee Member	19	1	5%	10	1	10%																								
Grassroot Party Committee Member	14	2	14%	25	6	24%	1320	94	7%	9	1	11%	5	3	60%	9	1	11%	7	2	29%							5	0	0%
Member of Party	43	9	21%	26	4	15%	787	541	69%	15	4	27%	3	2	66%	48	6	13%	9	2	22%	3	1	33%	3	0	0%	3	0	0%

Source: Author's elaboration based on information collected during the review workshops, June–July and October 2023.

5.4 Gender Pay Gap

The 2015 Law on Civil Servants, Article 14, classifies officials within the purview of MoHA into lower levels of management, ranging from Level 1 (the lowest salary scale) to Level 5 (highest salary scale). Senior management falls under the oversight of the Central Party Committee, designated at Level 6. Levels 1–5 consist of 15 increments of salary, incorporating considerations such as rank, an established calculation system, and factors like educational qualifications and whether the position is administrative or technical. In contrast, Level 6 is distinct from regular civil servants and comprises seven different steps. The Level 6 salary scale is specifically applicable to leadership and senior public administration positions within government institutions and other agencies that are equivalent to ministries.

Table 11 reveals a significant disparity in the representation of women at higher salary scales or leadership positions compared to men. Specifically, only 18 per cent of leaders within line ministries and 17 per cent within other agencies equivalent to ministries are women. The data in Table 11 shows that beyond Level 3, the proportion of female civil servants decreases as the salary level increases.

Table 11: Salary levels of civil servants in Lao PDR, 2022

Salary Scale 2022	Total	Female	% Female	Male	% Male
Civil servants overseen by MoHA, Level 1 to Level 5					
Level I (lowest)	68,050	37,525	55	30,525	45
Level II	4,531	2,119	47	2,412	53
Level III	13,731	8,042	59	5,689	41
Level IV	86,090	34,723	40	51,367	60
Level V	2,656	657	25	1,999	75
Senior management staff overseen by the Central Party Committee					
Level VI (Highest)					
Government Ministries	253	46	18	207	82
Equivalent to ministries	72	12	17	60	83

Source: MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

The array of compensation dimensions is influenced by various factors, such as the duration of engagement, successful completion of assigned tasks, entitlements tied to specific positions, personal characteristics, and external responsibilities related to projects or additional roles outside the primary job. This complexity makes it challenging to precisely determine an individual civil servant's earnings at each level and assess whether there exists a gender gap in compensation across these different dimensions.

5.5 Institutional Culture and Work-Life Balance

The review could not identify any legal framework, regulation, law, or policy specifically addressing the special needs of men and women civil servants, including those from ethnic groups or persons with disabilities. The sole exception pertains to measures implemented for social distancing during the COVID-19 outbreak. Under those provisions, civil servants who were at risk or mothers with young children could work from home (for a limited time). The Law on Civil Servants only includes clauses specific to women on leave for maternity and miscarriage up to seven months, as discussed earlier.

Discussions within the review indicate that traditional culture and social norms serve as obstacles preventing women from assuming leadership roles in the public sector. However, many participants contended that social and cultural norms only constitute a portion of the challenges faced in: (i) entering or pursuing a career in civil service; (ii) seeking political training while holding a position; and (iii) striving for leadership roles. Participants argued that a significant part of the challenge arises from the absence of official measures to support women in these endeavours.

Most participants expressed the opinion that mistreatment and harassment are not prevalent issues in the workplace. However, all participants acknowledged that younger staff members might feel compelled to accept tasks assigned by senior officers, even beyond regular working hours. Participants highlighted that female staff, irrespective of their position, often undertake office cleaning duties and attend to guests without hesitation. In contrast, their male colleagues often do not engage in such activities.

Several participants appeared to lack a clear understanding of what constitutes harassment, encompassing words, actions, and attitudes. The overall lack of awareness on the issue has resulted in the absence of adequate protection and reporting mechanisms. Nevertheless, participants endorsed the need to implement a mechanism to address mistreatment and harassment in the workplace. They proposed the establishment of a reporting and resolution unit that can be easily and confidentially accessed by both men and women civil servants, ensuring that all incidents are reported and professionally addressed.

It is important to note that participants often provided contradicting information or views. On the one hand, they affirmed that there is no gender inequality towards work-life balance – including parental leave, childcare, family care and other aspects – because they accepted the terms and conditions of work during the recruitment processes. On the other hand, they raised the same issues as major work-life balance issues that hugely affect female civil servants' career development. This issue was discussed at length in all three review consultation workshops and at the national workshop.

Participants also provided conflicting information and perceptions, asserting that there is no inequality in remuneration between female and male civil servants as compensation is determined based on their position titles and corresponding salary levels. However, as mentioned earlier, when asked about the factors contributing to the tendency of female civil servants to occupy lower positions, access less training and fall into lower salary brackets compared to their male colleagues, participants raised concerns related to maternity leave, training, social norms, expectations and women's perceived reluctance or lack of confidence in taking initiatives due to fears of additional burdens and responsibilities.⁵⁷

The following section outlines some of the participants' perceptions and attitudes raised in debates during the review, some of which contradict each other.

Attitudes towards women's leadership

- At the institutional level, the perception is that for a woman to take on a leadership role, she must conform to the following expectations: (i) come from a financially independent family so she can perform her tasks without financial concerns; and (ii) be a married women with a 'complete and warm family' and unblemished history and be able to carry out required tasks as men would.⁵⁸
- Men often have better social status, and because they are free from household chores, they can perform their duties better than women and easily travel when required.

Attitudes towards institutional and cultural norms

- Most participants suggested that men and women are treated equally within the public service and stated that they have not experienced discrimination or witnessed people being treated differently due to their ethnicity, degree of qualifications, grade/rank within the civil service, family status, religion, appearance, disability and/or sexual orientation, or gender identity and expression.
- There were some discussions regarding unofficial tasks such as serving coffee, tea and water to superiors and guests, cleaning, serving alcohol at social and public events, and running errands. etc. It was observed that women automatically and voluntarily took on these tasks.
- There was a consensus that due to staff policy requirements, a civil servant is not allowed to cross-dress and/or behave like the opposite sex at the workplace. The dress code and behaviour of each sex is instructed in the civil servant law and decree on the ethics of civil servants⁵⁹ (e.g. male civil servants are not allowed to have long hair, while women are not

⁵⁷ These observations align with findings from the November 2022 LWU report to the Central Party Committee.

⁵⁸ Author's discussions with female civil servants at the deputy director and director general levels, all of whom provided similar statements. They also said that divorce is often not accepted for a female leader.

⁵⁹ Decree on Ethics of Civil Servants, No. 184 /Government of Lao PDR, 2019.

allowed to wear trousers to government offices, except those women who are employed by the national defence sectors – police and military).⁶⁰

- It is interesting to note that most share the view that gender-related and other characteristics such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, rural/urban, etc. do not create barriers because by law, everyone is equal.
- Other issues related to flexible working hours were not seen as gender issues by the participants. During COVID-19, a civil servant could request home-based work when needed and pregnant women and young mothers were encouraged not to be present at the office.

Attitudes towards social norms and expectations

- While many participants reported that there are few gender gaps in the institutional culture regarding people with different backgrounds, all shared the view that socially there are many gender gaps. These include social expectations, education levels, ethnic groups' traditional culture (which can be either patrilineal and matrilineal) and other social aspects, including the fact that while it is acceptable for men to socialize after work, that is not the case for women because they are expected to take on household chores and childcare.

6. Evidence-based Analysis, Data Management and Measurable Indicators.

MoHA is responsible for compiling, recording and annually updating data on the count of male and female civil servants. The data is disaggregated by sex, age group, position type (administrative staff, technical staff, and senior management staff), and salary level groups.⁶¹ For instance, Table 12 shows the civil servant age groups. Data appearing in Table 12 reveals that the younger the age, the higher the share of female civil servants. This could be influenced by retirement, as outlined in the Law on Civil Servants, which stipulates a general retirement age of 60. However, women have an option to retire at the age of 55.

⁶⁰ Participants stated that each institution may have its own internal staff policies, such as allowing or not allowing women to work in the field, or to leave early to pick up children from school. This may greatly affect staff performance or staff performance assessment.

⁶¹ Note that this review is unable to identify civil servant data disaggregated by ethnic group and/or people with disability.

Table 12: Civil servants by age group

Aged Groups	Age 18 to 25		Age 26-30		Age 31-35		Age 36-40		Age 41-45		Age 46-50		Age 51-55		Age 56-60		Age Above 61	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
	1062	685	17040	11011	52390	29265	41413	18666	22179	8490	15127	6220	15584	6794	9479	1808	784	127
%		65%		65%		56%		45%		38%		41%		44%		19%		16%

Source: MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

Officially, the NCAWMC and LWU are responsible for coordinating, collecting and compiling data related to gender equality and women's advancement from line agencies, as they are the main entities responsible for reporting on gender equality to, for instance, the government, the Party, CEDAW and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

However, the relocation of the NCAWMC to LWU and subsequent embedding at the LWU office has confused ministries, which are unsure of which organization (MoHA, NCAWMC or LWU) is leading on issues related to data collection to promote GEPA. This issue, combined with the lack of gender action at the institutional level, makes it difficult for ministries to obtain accurate data beyond the aforementioned disaggregated data. At the subnational level, provinces rely on LWU offices to collect and analyse data.

All participants agreed on the need to establish a GEPA database due to the current absence of gender-specific data and mechanisms to monitor the implementation of laws and regulations on gender equality. This includes the absence of a monitoring system to track the implementation progress of the 9th NSDP and NPAGE targets on women in leadership positions.

Participants also reiterated the need for improved coordination between national and subnational levels of government. This will require MoHA as well as the NCAWMC and LWU to collaborate and work with line ministries to collect accurate statistics and create a database to monitor gender equality. The national GEPA database should include the use of indicators to facilitate monitoring data collection. It should also serve as a tool for tracking progress on the implementation of NPAGE and improve the accessibility of data by state agencies and the public.

Furthermore, to enhance work-place protection and combat harassment, participants suggested the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system to collect workplace harassment data.

To this end, line ministries, institutions equivalent to ministries, and local governments should provide monthly, quarterly, and annual reports detailing the progress made in gender equality and women's advancement. Below are some suggested data and indicators that could be considered⁶²:

- Percentage of women in leadership positions and all management positions (all management levels)
- Percentage of female civil servants overall and at all levels of employment
- Percentage of female civil servants who attend training and capacity-building in the country and overseas, and all employees who receive training and promotions
- Percentage of women who are eligible to be promoted to leadership positions in the public service
- Civil service employment quotas and statistics on resignations
- Specific quotas for female civil servants.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The majority of the national review participants asserted the absence of gender inequality in public sector management and/or public policy, citing equality under the law for all. They contended that there is no gender bias or discrimination in the workplace, and there is equality in staff recruitment processes, career development opportunities and civil service pay. However, they agreed and acknowledged that there are substantial gender gaps in almost all aspects of public administration.

This contradictory and unclear understanding of gender inequality in the public sector raises questions about whether participants fully grasp the meaning of gender equality in the public sector. The review noted that participants were unable to connect gender equality and the various challenges and barriers to the advancement of women within the civil service, in the context of policies and criteria related to recruitment, career development and receipt of subsidies.

Despite the relatively high overall percentage of female civil servants (45 per cent in 2017,⁶³ 48 per cent in 2021⁶⁴ and 47 per cent in 2022⁶⁵), significant gender disparity persists in leadership roles across national and subnational levels and sectors. In 2019, women held only 18 per cent of ministerial leadership positions and 22 per cent at the Director General and Deputy Director

⁶² Data and indicators outlined by FGD participants.

⁶³ LWU report to the Central Party Committee, 14 November 2022.

⁶⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau 2021, https://laosis.lsb.gov.la/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=856&tblId=DT_YEARBOOK_W001&conn_path=l2&language=en

⁶⁵ MoHA Statistics Yearbook 2022.

General level, contrasting sharply with the meagre 5 per cent and 7 per cent representation at the Provincial and District Governor levels, respectively (see section 4.6).

Statistics from MoHA (2022) also show that the average percentage of women who hold a leadership position is between 17 and 18 per cent, indicating that men occupy more than 80 per cent of leadership positions in the public sector in Lao PDR.

The review found that female civil servants' participation in leadership and decision-making positions is hindered by a range of constraints.

- Civil service administrative regulations and laws are written in gender-neutral language and fail to accurately identify and address gender-related gaps. It is therefore recommended that Lao PDR should promote a better understanding of the meaning and concept of gender equality and GEPA and raise awareness of national and international legal frameworks' objectives, including those of NPAGE, CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration, SDG 5 and so on.
- Lao PDR culture and society is male-dominated, so promoting gender equality should address gender-specific needs. Special measures and actions should be developed to promote a better understanding of theories and practices related to gender equality and empower women civil servants to exercise their equal rights – including gender equality – that are specified under various regulatory frameworks and action and implementation plans.
- Women civil servants have limited access to training and opportunities to achieve qualifications. It is imperative that the civil service create an enabling environment for women to access training and qualifications to allow them to advance their careers and salary to attain decision-making roles in public administration.

Recommendations: Below are some action points proposed for further discussion within the government.

1. Develop, approve and implement a National GEPA Action Plan for Lao PDR.
2. Within the National GEPA Action Plan, develop activities to create an enabling environment for female civil servants to actively engage in and gain access to basic needs and protections. This may include special measures targeting women civil servants during recruitment and capacity development processes and enhancing institutional culture and work-life balance by providing facilities and services to address parental needs, among others.

The National GEPA Action Plan should be a macro-level management plan with specific subnational implementation targets and key achievable indicators. It should:

- Be developed collaboratively by MoHA, the NCAWMC and LWU with support from the UN and other stakeholders, including line government agencies and finalized by September 2024. This requires a stakeholder consultation and/or policy dialogue at both national and subnational levels.
- Be managed/overseen by MoHA (which is an implementing agency).
- Be coordinated and monitored by the NCAWMC and MoHA.
- Be executed on the ground at both national and subnational level by LWU, and by each sector.
 - Receive support from the central government combined with development partners, including the UN, and bilateral and regional development partners.