

Submitted by CUSO/ GDG

Rural Domestic Violence and Gender Research: Lao PDR

During a discussion amongst women at a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) workshop in a Salavan (province of Laos PDR) rural community, the women raised the issue of being beaten by their husbands. This information was communicated back to a Laos based NGO, the Gender and Development Group, however the member organisations did not know whether these were unusual occurrences or not. The group decided that due to the extreme lack of research that had been done on the existence of violence against women in the Lao PDR, that it would be important to undertake a research project to provide a basis for proceeding with this issue.

The project CUSO and GDG conducted was a study of the prevalence, cause and impact of domestic violence in the Lao PDR. Data was collected through interviews with almost 1,000 villagers from 35 communities, in five provinces of the Lao PDR, in Bokeo, Luangprabang, Savannakhet, Salavan Provinces and Vientiane Prefecture. It was hoped that the information gathered during this project would provide the evidence and support needed to urge the governmental and non-governmental communities to contribute to the creation of services to address the problems related to gender based violence.

Throughout Asia, and even within the Lao PDR itself, there are many different cultures and lifestyles, each with their own unique traditions. Often there are culturally accepted roles of men and women in terms of workload, type of work and responsibilities and role in the family, including extended family. In Lao PDR, culture and traditions are the mainstay of the Lao lifestyle. Traditions and local wisdom play a key role in the day to day lives of many communities. In the Lao PDR, there are several traditional sayings describing the role of men and women in the family; “Men are the net, women are the basket”, “The husband should lead, the wife should follow” and “The man is the boss and women are the labour”. These views, and many others, reinforce gender inequality and creates disparity between the sexes, allowing men to have culturally accepted control over women.

Many different kinds of violence, physical and psychological , have been reported by surveys on violence against women throughout Asia, including this current survey in the Lao PDR. While most women are not able to define violence, other than as physical beatings, when asked if they had been subject to

each type of violence, as defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993, the victims were substantial. In the current study, 45% of women surveyed indicated that their spouses have been violent in some form towards them, revealing the high incidence of domestic violence in the areas surveyed.

Of those women who had experienced violence in the Lao PDR, up to 35% indicated that they had experienced mental violence, and up to 17% had experienced physical violence. Fifteen women out of 967 people surveyed (1.6% of all surveyed) responded that they had experienced sexual violence from their husbands. Nineteen women (1.9% of people surveyed) responded that the physical abuse continued while they were pregnant. A number of different factors can give rise to violence, or can exacerbate the violence. The most common factors influencing violent behaviour, as described by women victims, were that the violator was drunk (31%), money (13%) and work related problems (13%).

Gender inequality in family economics is a significant influencing factor in domestic violence. Analysis of the results of this survey revealed that violence is more likely to occur in cases where the woman earns less money than the man. It is not only a difference in earning ability or status that may influence violence, education can also be a factor in domestic violence. Analysis showed that less educated women are less likely to experience violence than women who have some or higher education. This may be inter-related to the fact that educated women have more experience and contacts outside their home and village, and are more likely to be vocal, outspoken and less demure/subdued with their husband.

The most common and noticeable impact of domestic violence is physical injuries. Twenty-five per cent of women, who were abused received physical injuries. In nearly every case recorded during this study, the victim suffered bruises and scratches. Fourteen cases of 57 were injured enough to require medical treatment, and six women were beaten to unconsciousness. In addition to physical injuries, there is also considerable impact on the mental health of the women. They may be nervous, anxious, scared of their husbands, worried about making decisions, no longer confident and have low self-esteem. The women may contemplate suicide but don't carry it out due to concerns over their children.

The family is central to human life, particularly in Lao PDR. It is the place where human beings can exchange love and receive and give care for one another. This places a woman in a difficult position when she experiences violence in the very institution that is meant to care for her. The answer to this can be particularly

challenging in the Lao PDR as the family is supposed to be the source of solutions to all problems. Older family members are often looked to for solutions to solving the problem. Yet sometimes a general respect for the family can cause a woman to ignore violence – many fear being criticised as a bad wife or family member.

The Lao culture has a saying, *“A woman without a husband is like a ring without a stone. There is nothing of worth in it”*. This shows the weight placed on Lao women to marry and to remain married, no matter the circumstances. This helps to explain the reason why women remain with violent husbands. While over half of the victims of violence in this survey reported that they left their homes because of the violence, mainly because they could no longer endure it, nearly all of those same women, returned to their husbands. In cases of domestic violence, when the woman has sought assistance, be it from family members or from village leaders, commonly the women have been counseled to stay with their husband, to discuss their roles and responsibilities and try to improve the relationships with their husband.

Data collected from this and other research is intended to serve as a solid base for interested agencies to further develop their tools e.g. sex dis-aggregated statistics, recording, compiling and reporting the cases of violence against women. It will also raise public awareness on the issue, and at the same time assist the legal institutions to implement effectively the existing laws and the government to develop further policies and strengthen the legal framework in addressing the issue of gender based violence, thereby meeting the needs of women and protection of their human rights .