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**Title of the paper**

***The Government Response to Noncompliance and its Limitation on  
Primary and Secondary Education in the Lao PDR***

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## **Abstract**

In many developing countries, behavioral change of policy targets has occurred dramatically and collectively in the process of working towards the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Laos has made great progress in school enrolment and gender equality in primary and secondary education. This study examined mechanism on rapid behavioral changes of noncompliant targets. Through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in the surveyed villages, several government responses to noncompliance and its limitation were identified. It became clear that Lao Women's Union played a significant role in changing a behavior.

## **Keywords**

behavioral change, education, enrolment, gender equality, Lao Women's Union, MDGs, noncompliance

## 1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that factors which affect enrolment and gender parity of primary and secondary school are strongly correlated to residence (rural area with road access, without road access, or urban area), mother's education, household wealth, and ethnic groups (GOL 2013). In Laos, the percentage of net enrollment in primary education increased from 58.8% in 1992, to 98.5% in 2015. The ratio of girls to boys in primary education improved from 0.79 in 1990, to 0.91 in 2012. These outcomes result not only from the institutional building on compulsory education and the capacity building of teachers, but also from the governmental response to noncompliance.

Public policy aims to change individuals' behavior by either forcing or permitting them to do things which they otherwise would not have done (Braithwaite 2006, Gofen 2014, Schneider and Ingram 1990, 1993; Weaver 2014, 2015; Winter & May 2001). Planning as the designing of human behavior and execution with reducing targets' cost of change are important to achieve policy goals (Simon et al. 1991: 451). As it is difficult to enforce policy upon individuals in many cases in developing countries, to induce them to do is to be taken into account when planning and implementing of policy.

In an arena for public sector reform in developing countries, concepts of New Public Service and New Public Governance have been shed light on recently (McCourt 2013, Robinson 2015). The New Public Service/New Public Governance approach focus more on being responsive to citizen's interests and values, and co-producing public service (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000, Osborne *et. al* 2016). Since there are multiple barriers to compliance, the government need to response to targets' noncompliant behavior. Weaver categorized barriers to behavioral change for individuals into eight: (1) Incentives and Sanctions; (2) Monitoring; (3) Enforcement; (4) Information and Cognition Problems; (5) Attitude and Beliefs; (6) Peer Effects; (7) Target Resources; and (8) Autonomy Issues (Weaver 2014, 2015). In this paper, "Government Resource" will be added as the 9<sup>th</sup> barrier, because (7) Target Resource does not always cover

lack of government resource in developing countries. The government cannot provide necessary school buildings, facilities, and teachers because of lack of finance and human resources.

Parents decisions regarding children's education are influenced by economic and demographic household characteristics, and characteristics of available educational facilities such as the number of teachers, and distance to school (Huisman and Smits 2008). The adverse cultural practice affected gender inequalities in enrolment in primary school (Colclough et al. 2000). However, few studies examined a mechanism of rapid behavioral changes for enrolment and gender equality in primary and secondary education, which have been occurred in the developing countries. Many village women who were born in 1970's and 1980's graduated only primary schools in the surveyed villages. Some village women dropped out at the middle of primary schools. How their children go to secondary school will be examined in this paper.

The objectives of this paper are twofold. First, the study examines the mechanisms to increase compliance in primary and secondary education in the surveyed villages in Laos. Second, the study examined a role of Lao Women's Union as an actor to break an intergenerational cycle of not being educated and becoming a farmer (Gofen 2009).

## **2. Main barriers for primary and secondary schooling**

Barriers for primary and secondary schooling in Laos as well as in developing countirs will be reviewed based on nine categories above.

### ***Target Resources***

High cost schooling is burden for poor households. Children are sometimes regarded as a labor. When children go to the school, parents need to pay the entrance and tuition fees as well as expenses for textbooks and a uniform. Opportunity costs also occurs. When children go to school, they are not able to take care of younger siblings at home and to help the family businesses including family farming. These direct and opportunity costs are barriers especially for low income family (Colclough et al. 2000, Huisman and Smits 2008). The study indicates that the richer household wealth is, the higher primary net attendance ratio is in Laos (GOL

2013: 59). Lack of target resources is a big barrier to schooling. In this case, targets mean parents of children.

### ***Government Resources***

If a government cannot provide a primary school or secondary school near a house, students cannot go to a school by walk. If primary school students take two hours go to a school, it is difficult for them to go to a school every day. A secondary school is not located in every village. Students from several neighboring villages go to one secondary school. In this case, they go to a school by a motor-bike or bus, or they stay in a dormitory next to the secondary school. Construction of roads or dormitories by the government is a key factor for schooling in secondary education. Even though school buildings are often provided by Official Development Assistance (ODA), a government commitment is important for construction of schools. Scarce government resource, especially for school and road construction is a barrier.

### ***Attitude and Beliefs***

Parents' attitude and beliefs influence students' schooling. If mothers do not have any education, primary net attendance ratio is quite low compared to other cases (GOL 2013). That is partially because they do not know the importance of education. There is a belief that sons' education is more important than daughters', considering return to parents in the future under absence of the pension schemes. Currently, demand for female increases as factory workers. They remit to their parents. Therefore, the belief may be changed. However, if students or parents do not know what is going on out of their village, students repeat the same cycle of their parents. Most of them are not able to understand the importance of education and become farmers as same as their parents without proper information. Community also may influence students' schooling. Primary net attendance ratio and gender parity ratio have a tendency by an ethnic group which children belong to. Attitude and beliefs of household and/or community affect these ratios.

### ***Information and Cognition Problems***

Information is limited in rural areas. If parents do not have enough information on primary and secondary education, they may obey conventional ideas or old people's opinions.

### ***Peer effects***

Peer effects is one of opportunities to know the importance of education. If parents know that a daughter of neighborhood got high education and a good job with high salary, they may want to send their girls to a school. If they do not have any chances to talk to peers, information which they can get is limited.

### ***Autonomy Issues***

If parents insist that their daughter or son should not go to school, the daughter or son may face difficulties. Parents' attitude for education is very important for children's schooling especially in primary and secondary schools.

### ***Incentive and sanction***

If a school fee is not charged, this will be an incentive for parents to send their children go to a school. Lack of sanitation facilities in a school will be a disincentive especially for female students.

### ***Other barriers to be considered***

Early marriage of girls is one of important factors for dropping out of a school (GOL 2015). Job opportunity at a factory or other places is also one of barriers for female students. Even if female students do not complete primary school, they can work at garment factories in Vientiane (WB 2012).

However, these issues are related with their safety net. In the rural and remote areas, most of them become farmers. They do not have any official social insurance systems in the villages. If they get married and give a birth early, children can take care of them at an early stage of life.

### ***Comprehensive analysis***

Government initiatives for MDGs and responses to noncompliance might reduce barriers to compliance. Targets (in this case, parents or mothers of children) might also work to reduce barriers together with educational officials, because government was short of financial and human resources. By analyzing responsive policies and its influence, it will make clear which barriers were reduced or removed.

### **3. Method**

From December 2015 to November 2016, qualitative data was gathered using two methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) with village women, and individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with village women, representatives of village authorities, public officials in ministries, capital and provincial department, and district offices, representatives of Lao Women's Union at central, capital and provincial, district, village level, an officer of UN Women. Discussions were conducted in Lao and Khmu languages and translated into English. Interviews were conducted in Lao, Hmong, and English languages. Interviews in Lao and Hmong languages were translated into English.

#### ***Focus group discussions***

Seven FGDs were conducted with village women in groups of 4-10 participants. Two FGDs were held mainly with village women who gave a birth before 2000, and with village women who gave a birth after 2001, respectively in one village. In another village, two FGDs were conducted in the same manner. In the village where population consists of two ethnic groups, one FGD was conducted with Lao village women, another FGD with Khmu village women. The seventh FGD was conducted with village women in one village.

#### ***Individual interviews***

13 village women were selected for individual in-depth interview in five villages. Five representatives from Ministry of Education and Sports, Vientiane Capital departments of Education and Sports, District Education and Sports offices were interviewed. 11 individual in-

depth interviews for representatives from Lao Women's Union at central, capital and provincial, district, and village level were conducted. One individual in-depth interview for an officer of UN Women was conducted.

### ***Surveyed districts***

The study selected one district (district A) in Vientiane capital. The district was one of the 47 poorest districts in Laos. In 2014 the district declared graduation from the list of the 47 poorest districts. There are 35 villages with population of 30,747. There are 31 complete primary schools and three incomplete primary schools (MPI 2015). According to a district planning office, average of per capita GDP from 2009 to 2014 is US\$320. Four villages were selected for a field survey.

One district (District B) was selected to compare with District A. District B was located in the mountain area with four hours drive from a center of Vientiane. Two villages were selected from District B for a field survey.

## **4. Government initiatives and results of MDGs**

In March, 2011, the 9<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Lao People's Revolution Party (the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress) was held. Since the 6<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in 1996, graduating from the UN list of least developed countries (LDCs) by 2020 is one of the most important policies. From 2006 to 2010, the Lao economy grew by an average of 7.9 % annually with income per capita US\$1,069 (Vientiane Times 2011a). However, social development was relatively lagging. The MDGs progress report in 2008 indicated that Laos would not meet some of important targets of MDGs (GOL 2008). For instance, "universal primary schooling" of Goal 2 is off track. The report claims that "net enrolment rates are satisfactory, but low primary school completion rates keep the target off track." "Incomplete schools are strongly correlated with dropout rates." "Eliminate gender disparity in all level of education" of Goal 3 is off track. The report gives a comment: "gender disparity in education is overall reducing, but very slowly, and increases with the level of education." "The target is on track at the primary level only." "The lowest enrolment is among ethnic girls in rural areas" (GOL 2008).

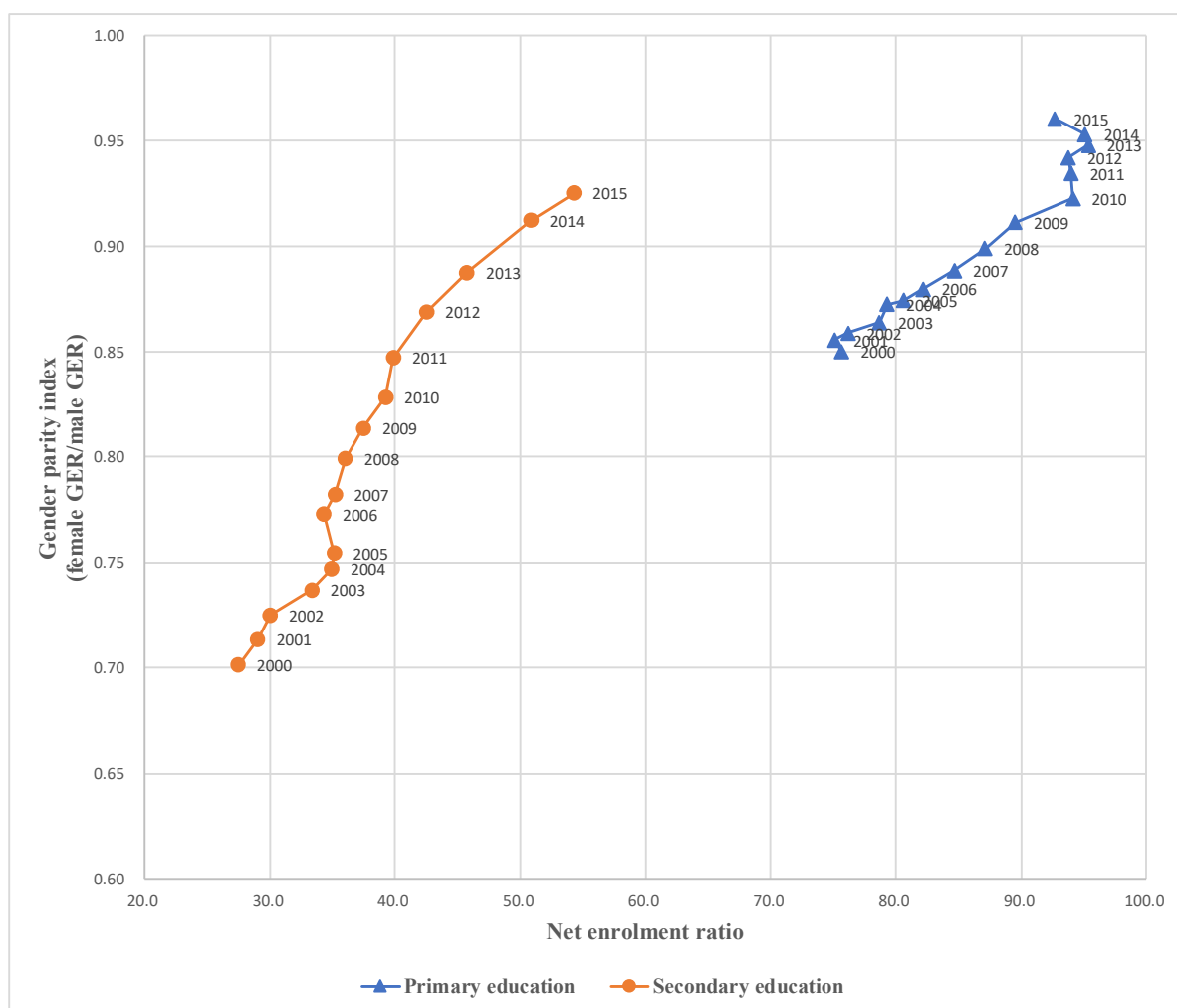


Under the circumstances above, the political report which was released by Secretary General of the party to the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress said “we have to promote expansion of education strongly and objectively, in particular in rural areas for poverty reduction and to achieve the MDGs” (Vientiane Times 2011b). MDGs achievement is one of the milestones of graduating from LDC status by 2020. The importance of human resource development was emphasized in the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. It was indispensable to address the obstacles which noncompliant targets had faced to the achievement of MDGs. Under the direction of the Party, the GOL accelerated the activities at both policy stage and implementation stage.

A summary review of MDGs was issued in September, 2015 (GOL 2015). For MDG2: Achieve universal primary education, the GOL had achieved a net enrolment ratio of 98.5 %, meeting the MDG target (98%) related to enrollment. However, survival rate to grade 5 remains low, at around 78 % and needs to be much higher in order to fully achieve the goal (95%) (GOL 2015: 6). For MDG3: Promote gender equality and empower women, the gender equality gap in education has narrowed in all the three levels, i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary level, of education enrolment, with gender equality nearly achieved for primary education (GOL 2015: 8). Targets on ratio of girls to boys (number of girls per 100 boys) enrolled in primary, secondary, and tertiary were all 100 by 2015.

Figure 1 shows relationship between Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI) in primary education and secondary education in Laos. It indicates that although NER of primary education has been fluctuated beyond 90% since 2011, GPI of primary education have been improves steadily. For secondary education, while GPI has been improved stradly, NER has increased significantly from 2011 to 2015 compared with from 2000 to 2010.

In next section, the barriers to compliance in primary and secondary schools and government responses will be examined.



**Figure 1 Relationship between NER and GPI in primary education and secondary education in Laos**  
Source : Data from World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2017

## 5. Government response to noncompliance

The GOL has responded to remove barriers for noncompliant targets in cooperation with the international organizations. Laos is one of UNESCO member states and is strongly committed to ensure the achievement of Education for All (EFA). EFA complements MDGs in the policy arena of education.

### *Attitude and beliefs*

In District A, no women agreed with that boy's education should be prioritized. Ideas on gender equality prevailed among village women. A village woman explained a change of attitude and

belief for education: “The idea that boys should study and girls should work was heard in the past, but the idea of gender equality is common now.” Another woman illustrated the government’s role of government for gender equality: “It is a good activity and a duty for all the student to go to school. This is a government policy. The government trained representatives of a village. Village authority taught villagers about gender equality. Village people have accepted this idea.” Both central and local officials recognized that it is essential for family to understand the importance of education. When parents who do not send their children to go to primary school, Village Education Development Committees (VEDCs) need to persuade parents to change an attitude and beliefs. In 2008 Ministerial Decree made provision for the establishment of VEDCs. Although VEDC chairperson is village chief (or vice chief), VEDC members consist of teachers, the president of the village Lao Woman’s Union, the secretary of the Lao Youth Union and the president of the Parents’ Association. In some villages of District A, VEDCs have not been established or are not working. In this case, District Women’s Union and Village Women’s Union work with the Parents’ Association to persuade parents to send their children to school.

### ***Information and cognition problem***

Village meeting and Village Lao Women’s Union meeting are important opportunities for village people to know government policies. Because many women are members of Lao Women’s Union, they can know government policies on education and gender equality through Village Women’s Union meetings. In one of surveyed villages, for example, the number of Lao Women’s Union is 102 people (32%) out of 323 women people. Many women who have children are members of Village Lao Women’s Union.

Village women’s union meetings are held in a whole village four times per a year. All village women are invited for Village Women’s Union meetings even if they are not members of Lao Women’s Union. In the meeting, officials from district sector offices such as District Education and Sports Office provide information for participants. District Women’s Union sometimes participate in a meeting to propaganda party and government policies. Even if district women’s

union member does not join Village Women's Union meeting, a head of Village Women Union joins a meeting which is held by District Women's Union quarterly. After she return back to her village, she can convey what she heard in the District Women's Union meeting to women villager in a Village Women Union meeting. In the same manner, a head of District Women's Union joins the Capital/Province Women's Union meeting and a head of capital/Province Women's Union joins Central Women's union meeting. These meetings start from a central level at first and gradually go down to a village level. Information on public policy goes from central to village (grassroots) in a top-down manner or in authoritarian manner. However, there is an adverse information flow, that is, a bottom-up information in a meeting. Each participant has a chance to give an opinion to upper authority through a meeting. For example, head of Village Women's Union can express her opinion in the District Women's Union meeting. Noncompliant situation at grassroot level can be conveyed to central in a bottom-up manner or a deliberative manner.

### ***Target Resource***

In 2011 the Ministry of Education introduced a decree prohibiting schools from charging official fees in primary schools after introducing a School Block Grant (SBG) program. Schools can use the grant from conducting repairs at the school, to acquiring teaching and learning materials, or paying overdue utility bills. The SBG is one component of a growing number of School Based Management (SBM) program, which is implemented in the world (EFA 2015 Review Group and Secretariat Group, Lao PDR 2014).

Even if school fees are not charged, parents need to pay voluntarily to school because SBG from the GOL is not enough. When students stay in a dormitory, parents must send some money for food. Some parents complain the difference between the past and current situation: "As distance to school was far in the past, children preferred to stay with family and dropped out of a school. But now students do not drop out because they seek a better life in the future. The problem is money for continuous study." The official of Department of Education and Sports in Vientiane Capital explained the relation between school enrolment and economic

situation: “Girls’ enrolment ratio is almost the same as boys’ one in primary education. However, girls’ enrolment ratio from primary to secondary education decreases comparing to boys’ one. Girls work for factories or other jobs to support their families in Vientiane or get married because their economic situations are not good. Girls can go to a secondary school in case of good economic condition of family.”

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is one of the policies for which the GOL has made efforts. ECCE program provides pre-primary education and school readiness for children in some remote and poor communities. Students who studied in pre-primary school are unlikely to repeat the same grade and drop out.

### ***Government Resource***

Access to school is one of key barrier for students. Primary school was constructed in almost all the villages in District A. Most students can access to primary school in their own village. On the other hand, secondary school students need go to a secondary school in the neighboring village. District Education and Sports Office divided the district into five groups. Each group of villages has one secondary school. If secondary school does not exist near a house, a road access to a secondary school is very important. Road conditions has significantly been improved for a last decade in District A. The district was isolated even in the Vientiane Capital until the road was upgraded in 2013. While it takes one and half an hour to drive from a center of Vientiane Capital to a center of District A now, it took four hours to drive until 2013. In the district, another road was improved in 2011. This road is still an unpaved road, but people’s access from a village to a center of District A was improved. Another narrowed road was built from one surveyed village to a center of District A in 2007. Although this road is uncertain for driving in a raining season, this road brought an easy access to other villages. In the past, village people used a boat instead of a car or motorbike. Thanks to these roads, secondary students can go to school by motorbike from their home.

Some secondary school buildings and dormitories were constructed by villagers. This is a case of co-production to remove barriers for education. In one of surveyed villages, lower secondary

school was opened in 2015. Though the building was made of bamboo with no water system, parents are delighted to send children to the lower secondary school in the village where they live.

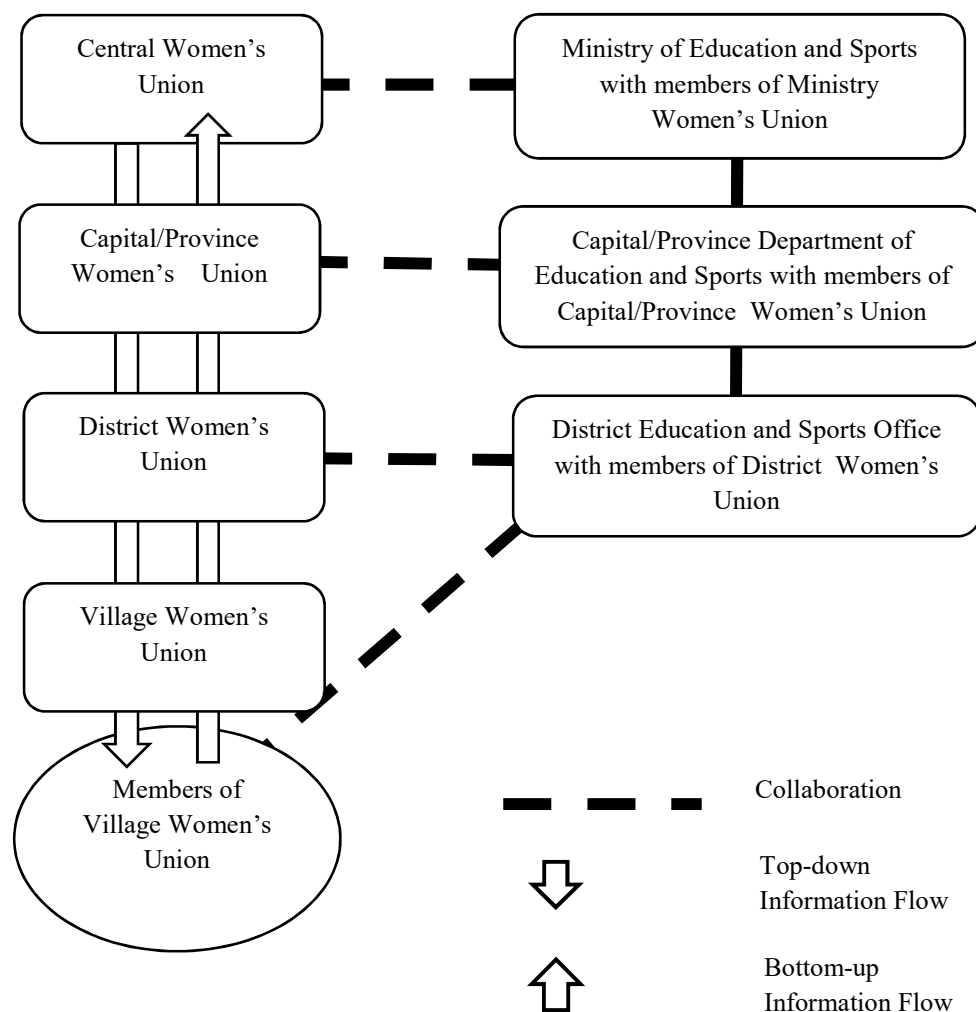
According to a district education and sports official, the number of secondary school is not enough in District A. The District Education and Sports Office has a plan that two secondary school will be constructed in the future. He also mentioned that the number of teachers is not enough and a quality of education does not reach a standard of government in secondary education.

## **6. Lao Women's Union and its network**

The Lao Women's Union can play an important role in behavior change in villages in terms of information, attitude and beliefs.

The Lao Women's Union is one of four mass organizations authorized under Article 7 of the 1991 Constitution to mobilize the Lao people and protect their rights and interests. Lao Women's Union has a network from central to grassroots (village) level. While the number of female population of Laos is 3.24 million, the number of members of Lao Women's Union is 0.93 million. The Lao Women's Union has been engaged in many activities to support skill training, income generation, awareness-raising about women's rights, including in the workplace. The Lao Women's Union address emerging issues such as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking (ADB 2004).

Figure 2 shows relation between Lao Women's Union and education sector. The Ministry of Education and Sports also has Lao Women's Union unit inside the ministry. The member of Lao Women's Union in the Ministry of Education and Sports can promote gender equality policy through their own jobs. When the Ministry of Education and Sports have a meeting to discuss policies related with gender equality, the ministry will invite representatives of Lao Women's Union.



**Figure 2 Collaboration with Lao Women's Union and Ministry of Education and Sports**

Lao Women's Union and the Ministry of Education and Sports can corroborate in policy making. The District Education and Sports Office does not have an office in the village. When the district Education and Sports Office need to disseminate their policy, they can come to Village Women's Union meeting. The president of Village Women's Union is one of members of Village Education Development Committee (VEDC). The role of VEDCs is promoting enrolment and completion, as well as supporting school management and learning achievement (Seel, *et al.* 2015). Village Women's Union and the district Education and Sports Office can corroborate in policy implementation. The members of Village Women's Union are closely doing activities such as managing village found (micro finance) and serving for a ceremony.

The Lao-Tai ethnic group has a matrilineal society where inheritance is passed down through the Women's side of family (Lao Women's Union 2012: 4 in English). In the surveyed three villages in District A, most of villagers belong to the Lao-Tai ethnic group. Men often move to live with women's family after marriage. Village women know well each other from childhood. This social network worked effectively on breaking barriers of attitude and beliefs (intergenerational cycle) and disseminating gender policy to village women.

Village Women's Union and social network work well in the villages of District A where the majority of the population is of the Lao-Tai ethnic group. However, they do not work in the villages of District B where mostly Hmong people live. The difference in performance is explained by their kinship structure. The Hmong ethnic group has a patrilineal society and the number of members of Village Women's Union is relatively small against the population of village women.

### ***Limitations of Government Response***

Table 1 shows the number of students and the GPI in primary and secondary schools in District A in 2015. The number gradually decreases from primary school grade one to secondary school grade 7. A trend of decrease of the number is almost the same between male students and female students except secondary school grade 7. The main reason for dropout is economic condition of household. A mother explained a current student situation: "Boys went to school in the past. But gender equality gain ground now. Female students study more than male students. Boys are mischievous and always play. Then, they sometimes drop out of school."



**Table 1 The number of students and GPI in primary and secondary school in District A in 2015**

	Total	male student	female student	GPI (number of female/ number of male)
Primary Grade 1	689	350	339	0.97
Primary Grade 2	687	351	336	0.96
Primary Grade 3	642	345	297	0.86
Primary Grade 4	653	319	334	1.05
Primary Grade 5	610	306	304	0.99
Subtotal: Primary school students	3,281	1,671	1,610	0.96
Secondary Grade 1	542	271	271	1.00
Secondary Grade 2	561	291	270	0.93
Secondary Grade 3	437	207	230	1.11
Secondary Grade 4	408	214	194	0.91
Subtotal: Lower secondary school students	1,948	983	965	0.98
Secondary Grade 5	304	155	149	0.96
Secondary Grade 6	230	110	120	1.09
Secondary Grade 7	195	115	80	0.70
Sub-total Upper secondary school students	729	380	349	0.92
Total	5,958	3,034	2,924	0.96

Source: Data from the District Education and Sports Office

### ***Comparison with two villages in the mountain area***

Table 2 shows the number of students and GPI in primary and secondary school in District B in 2015. District B is located in a mountain area and many Hmong people live in District B. Although gender parity ratio is almost 1 from primary school grade 3 to secondary school grade 4, gender disparity increases from secondary school grade 5 to grade 7. It indicates that primary education for girls has already been accepted as a social norm and a family value, but villagers have only partially accepted the importance of upper secondary education for girls. According

to the province education and sports official, noncompliant behavior in secondary education results from more fundamental life circumstances: “The Hmong live in a highland area and rely on subsistence farming.” “Getting married and giving birth early in life means their child can take care of them from an early stage.” Therefore, girls often drop out of secondary school at around 15 years of age to get married. Noncompliance is connected with their safety net.

**Table 2 The number of students and GPI in primary and secondary school in District B in 2015**

	Total	male student	female student	GPI (number of female/ number of male)
Primary Grade 1	893	490	403	0.82
Primary Grade 2	746	386	360	0.93
Primary Grade 3	778	376	402	1.07
Primary Grade 4	785	387	398	1.03
Primary Grade 5	689	343	346	1.01
Subtotal: Primary school students	3,891	1,982	1,909	0.96
Secondary Grade 1	758	395	363	0.92
Secondary Grade 2	678	330	348	1.05
Secondary Grade 3	567	284	283	1.00
Secondary Grade 4	495	260	235	0.90
Subtotal: Lower secondary school students	2,498	1,269	1,229	0.97
Secondary Grade 5	416	238	178	0.75
Secondary Grade 6	360	211	149	0.71
Secondary Grade 7	341	206	135	0.66
Sub-total Upper secondary school students	1,117	655	462	0.71
Total	7,506	3,906	3,600	0.92

Source: Data from the District Education and Sports Office

## **Conclusions**

Government responses reduced barriers and caused children go to primary and secondary schools. Villagers (parents of children) also worked to reduce barriers by construction of school buildings and dormitories. Village Women' Union members (especially the president) worked to persuade parents to send their children to go to a school in corroboration with District Education and Sports offices. Activities of Village Women' Union contributes to behavior changes in terms of information and attitude and beliefs. Its social network influenced their behavioral changes.

However, the number of students decrease yearly in primary and secondary education. Although several reasons for drop-out exists, the significant reason is economic condition of households (lack of target resource). In District B, gender disparity increases from secondary school grade 5 to grade 7. Early marriage is related with safety net in rural and remote areas. Early marriage may also come from an attitude that completion of lower secondary school is enough for girls or a belief that girls should get married early for the future well-being. In contrast to the villages in District B, it will take time to change noncompliant behavior in upper secondary education.

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