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Policy Implementation - The Role of Policy Targets

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

Many developing countries have made dramatic and collective progress with behavioral changes of policy targets in the process of working toward the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Laos has made significant advances in school enrollment and gender equality in primary and secondary education. This study examined the mechanisms of rapid behavioral changes of noncompliant targets. Through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in the surveyed villages, the study identified several government responses to noncompliance and the limitations of those responses. The Lao Women's Union played a significant role in changing behavior to make up for the government's limitations in the villages.

Keywords: behavioral change, education, enrollment, gender equality, Lao Women's Union, MDGs, noncompliance

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that the factors that affect enrollment and gender parity in primary and secondary schools are strongly correlated to residence (rural area with road access, without road access, or urban area), mother's education, household wealth, and ethnicity (GOL, 2013). In Laos, the percentage of net enrollment in primary educational institutions 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 improvements result not only from the institutional expansion of compulsory education and the expanded capacity of teachers, but also from governmental response to noncompliance.

Public policy aims to change individuals' behavior by either forcing or permitting them to do things that they otherwise would not have done (Braithwaite, 2006; Gofen, 2014; Schneider and Ingram, 1990, 1993; Weaver, 2014, 2015; Winter & May, 2001). Planning as a means of designing of human behavior and executing through a reduction in the cost of change for targets are important to achieve policy goals (Simon et al., 1991, p. 451). In many cases enforcing policy upon individuals in developing countries is difficult, so strategies for inducing action must be taken into account when planning and implementing of policy.

Recent research into public sector reform in developing countries has shed light on the concepts of New Public Service and New Public Governance (McCourt, 2013; Robinson, 2015). The New Public Service/New Public Governance approach focuses on cultivating responsiveness to citizen interests and values, and co-producing public services (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000; Osborne et al., 2016). Since multiple barriers to compliance exist, governments need to respond to targets' noncompliant behavior. Weaver divided barriers to behavioral change for individuals into eight categories: (1) Incentives and Sanctions; (2) Monitoring; (3) Enforcement; (4) Information and Cognition Problems; (5) Attitudes and Beliefs; (6) Peer Effects; (7) Target Resources; and (8) Autonomy Issues (Weaver, 2014, 2015). This paper adds "Government Resources" as a 9th barrier, because (7) Target Resources does not always make up for a lack of government resources in developing

countries. When they lack finances and human resources, governments cannot provide the necessary school buildings, facilities, and teachers.

Research has shown that parents' decisions regarding their children's education are influenced by the economic and demographic characteristics of individual households, and the characteristics of available educational resources, including the number of teachers, and the distance to school (Huisman and Smits, 2008). Research has also shown that adverse cultural practices affect gender inequalities in enrollment in primary school (Colclough et al., 2000). However, few studies have examined the mechanisms of the rapid behavioral changes regarding enrollment and gender equality in primary and secondary education that have occurred in developing countries. Many village women who were born in 1970's and 1980's only graduated from primary schools in the surveyed villages. Some village women dropped out in the middle of primary school. This paper examines how the children of these women manage to go to primary and secondary schools.

The objectives of this paper are twofold. First, it examines the mechanisms that have increased compliance with primary and secondary education in the surveyed villages in Laos. Second, it analyzes the role of the Lao Women's Union in breaking an intergenerational cycle (Gofen, 2009) whereby women remained uneducated farmers.

2. Main Barriers for Primary and Secondary Schooling

This section reviews how the barriers to primary and secondary schooling are built in Laos and other developing countries. The section will not examine (2) Monitoring and (3) Enforcement, because the enforcement and monitoring of schooling is far from realistic in the developing countries like Laos that are short of public financial and human resources.

Incentives and Sanctions

The absence of fees for schooling acts as an incentive for parents to send their children to school. The lack of sanitation facilities in schools acts as a disincentive for enrollment, especially for female students.

Information and Cognition Problems

Information is limited in rural areas. If parents do not have enough information about primary and secondary education, they may obey conventional ideas or follow the opinions of the elderly. Lacking sufficient information, most of parents are unable to understand the importance of education and their children become farmers like them.

Attitude and Beliefs

Parents' attitudes and beliefs influence students' schooling. If mothers do not have any education, the net attendance ratio in primary school is quite low compared to other cases (GOL, 2013). That results partially from the fact that they do not know the importance of education. Considering future returns in the absence of the pension schemes, some families believe that the education of their sons is more important than that of their daughters. Currently, the demand for female workers is increasing, and women in these positions typically remit to their parents. So this belief may be changing. However, if students or parents are unaware of trends outside their villages, students follow in their parents' footsteps. Communities may also influence students' schooling. Primary school net attendance ratios and gender parity ratios correlate to children's ethnic groups. Attitudes and beliefs in communities may affect these ratios, especially in rural and remote areas.

The early marriage of girls contributes to their dropping out of a school (GOL, 2015). In rural and remote areas, the majority of people become farmers. The villages do not have any official social insurance systems. They believe that if women get married and give birth early, their children can take care of them at an early stage of life. This belief is related to an idea of safety net. It is difficult to determine whether the early marriage takes place based on a belief or safety net.

Peer effects

Peer effects influence parent and student opportunities to understand the importance of education. If parents know that their neighbor's daughter received advanced education and got

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, their access to information remains limited.

Target Resources

The lack of target resources is a considerable barrier to schooling. In this case, the targets are parents of school-aged children. The high cost of schooling is a burden for poor households. Children are sometimes regarded as a labor. When children go to the school, parents need to pay entrance and tuition fees as well as expenses for textbooks and uniforms as direct costs. Opportunity costs also occur. When children go to school, they cannot care for younger siblings at home and help with family businesses including family farming. These costs are significant barriers, especially for low-income families (Colclough, et al., 2000; Huisman and Smits, 2008). Research indicates that, in Laos, the richer household the higher the net attendance ratio in primary school (GOL, 2013, p. 59).

Job opportunities at factories or in other places also act as barriers for female students. Even if female students do not complete primary school, they can work at garment factories in Vientiane (WB, 2012).

Autonomy Issues

If parents insist that their daughters or sons should not go to school, the daughters or sons may face difficulties. Parents' attitudes toward education are very important for children's schooling, especially in primary and secondary schools.

Government Resources

If a government does not provide a primary school or secondary school near where they live, students cannot walk to school. If it takes primary school students two hours to get to school, they struggle to attend school every day. Secondary schools are not located in every village, and, typically, students from several neighboring villages attend a single secondary school. In such cases, they travel to school by bicycle, motorbike or bus, or they stay in dormitories near the secondary school.

Government construction of schools is crucial for maintaining enrollment in primary educational institutions. A lack of government resources, especially for school, dormitory, and road construction, is a barrier to the expansion of secondary schooling. Even though Official Development Assistance (ODA) often provides school buildings, government commitments remain important for school construction and maintenance.

Comprehensive analysis

Government initiatives for MDGs and responses to noncompliance might reduce barriers to compliance. Because governments lack financial and human resources, target side (in this case, parents or mothers of children) might also work together with educational officials to reduce barriers. Analyzing government response and noncompliant target side's action to its limitation will clarify how barriers have been reduced or removed.

3. Method

From December 2015 to November 2016, the researcher gathered qualitative data using two methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) with village women, and individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with village women, representatives of ministries, capital and provincial departments, and district and village offices, representatives of Lao Women's Union at the central, capital and provincial, district, and village level, and an officer of UN Women. The researcher and assistant conducted the discussions in Lao and Khmu and translated them into English; they conducted the interviews in Lao, Hmong, and English, and translated the interviews in Lao and Hmong into English.

Focus Group Discussions

This study included seven FGDs with groups of 4-10 village women from four separate villages. In two villages, one FGD focused on village women who gave a birth before 2000, and the other focused on village women who gave a birth after 2001. In the village where the population consists of two ethnic groups, the researcher and assistant conducted

one FGD with Lao village women and another with Khmu village women. The seventh FDG was conducted with one group of village women in the fourth village.

Individual Interviews

The researcher selected 13 village women for individual in-depth interviews in five villages, and interviewed five representatives from the Ministry of Education and Sports, Vientiane Capital Departments of Education and Sports, and District Education and Sports offices. The researcher also conducted 11 individual in-depth interviews with representatives from the Lao Women's Union at the central, capital and provincial, district, and village level, and one individual in-depth interview with an officer of UN Women.

Surveyed Districts

The study selected one district (district A) in the Vientiane capital. District A was one of the 47 poorest districts in Laos until 2014, when it graduated from that list. The district includes 35 villages and has a total population of 30,747. It is home to 31 complete and three incomplete primary schools (MPI, 2015). According to a district planning office, the average per capita GDP from 2009 to 2014 was US \$320. The researcher selected four villages from district A for the field survey.

The study selected another district (District B) to compare with District A. District B is located in a mountainous region, a four-hour drive from the center of Vientiane. The researcher selected two villages from district B for the field survey.

4. Government Initiatives and the Results of MDGs

In March 2011, the Lao People's Revolution Party (the 9th Party Congress) held its 9th National Congress. Since the 6th National Party Congress in 1996, graduating from the UN list of least developed countries (LDCs) by 2020 has been one of the party's top policy priorities. From 2006 to 2010, the Lao economy grew by an average of 7.9 % annually, with income per capita reaching US \$1,069 (Vientiane Times, 2011a). However, relative to these improvements, social development lagged. The MDGs progress report in 2008 indicated that

Laos would not meet some of its important targets (GOL 2008). For example, Goal 2—“universal primary schooling”—was off track. The report claimed: “net enrollment rates are satisfactory, but low primary school completion rates keep the target off track ... Incomplete schools are strongly correlated with dropout rates.” The report also indicated that Goal 3—“Elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education”—was off track: “gender disparity in education is falling overall, but very slowly, and disparities increase with education levels ... The target is on track at the primary level only ... The lowest enrollment is among ethnic girls in rural areas” (GOL, 2008).

Addressing these shortfalls, the political report released by the Secretary General of the party to the 9th Party Congress asserted, “we must promote the expansion of education strongly and objectively, in particular in rural areas to reduce poverty and to achieve the MDGs” (Vientiane Times, 2011b). Achieving the MDGs is an important milestone for graduating from LDC status by 2020. The 9th Party Congress emphasized the importance of human resource development, identifying it as indispensable for addressing the obstacles to achieving MDGs that noncompliant targets had faced. Under the Party’s direction, the GOL accelerated activities at both the policy and implementation stages.

A summary review of MDGs was issued in September 2015 (GOL, 2015). For MDG2—achieve universal primary education—the GOL had achieved a net enrollment ratio of 98.5 %, meeting the MDG enrollment target (98%). However, the retention rate to grade 5 remained low, at around 78% and needs to be much higher in order to fully achieve the target (95%) (GOL, 2015, p.6). Regarding MDG3—promote gender equality and empower women—the gender equality gap in education had narrowed at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education enrollment, with gender equality nearly achieved for primary education (GOL, 2015, p.8). Targets for the 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 the relationship between the Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in primary education and secondary education in Laos. It indicates

that although the NER for primary education has fluctuated beyond 90% since 2011, the GPI of primary education has steadily improved. For secondary education, while the GPI has improved steadily, the NER increased significantly from 2011 to 2015 compared with from 2000 to 2010.

The next section examines the barriers to compliance in primary and secondary schools, the government responses to these barriers, and noncompliant target side’s action against the government response’s limitation.

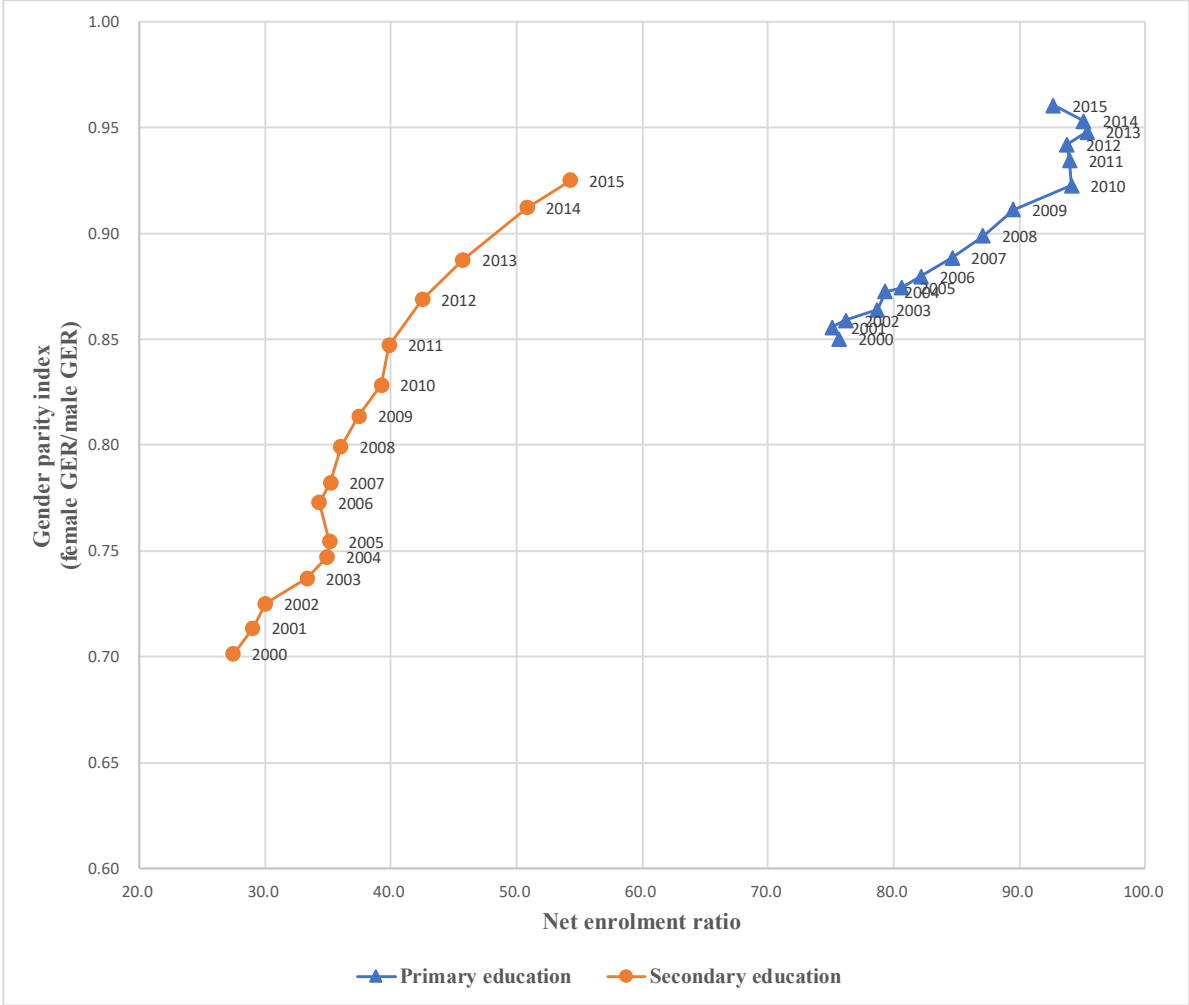


Figure 1. Relationship between NER and GPI in primary and secondary education in Laos
 Source: Data from World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2017

5. Government Response to Noncompliance

The GOL has attempted to remove multiple barriers for noncompliant targets. In the nine barriers listed above, reduction of barriers in (1) access to school (government resources), (2) household economic condition (target resources), and (3) attitudes and beliefs regarding girls' education, and (4) information is thought to be minimum necessary conditions for girls schooling. This section examines government response regarding these four barriers through the empirical data. The section also identifies actions taken by noncompliant target side against limitations of government response. Figure 2 shows relationships between barriers, government response, noncompliant target side's action, and behavioral change for girls' schooling.

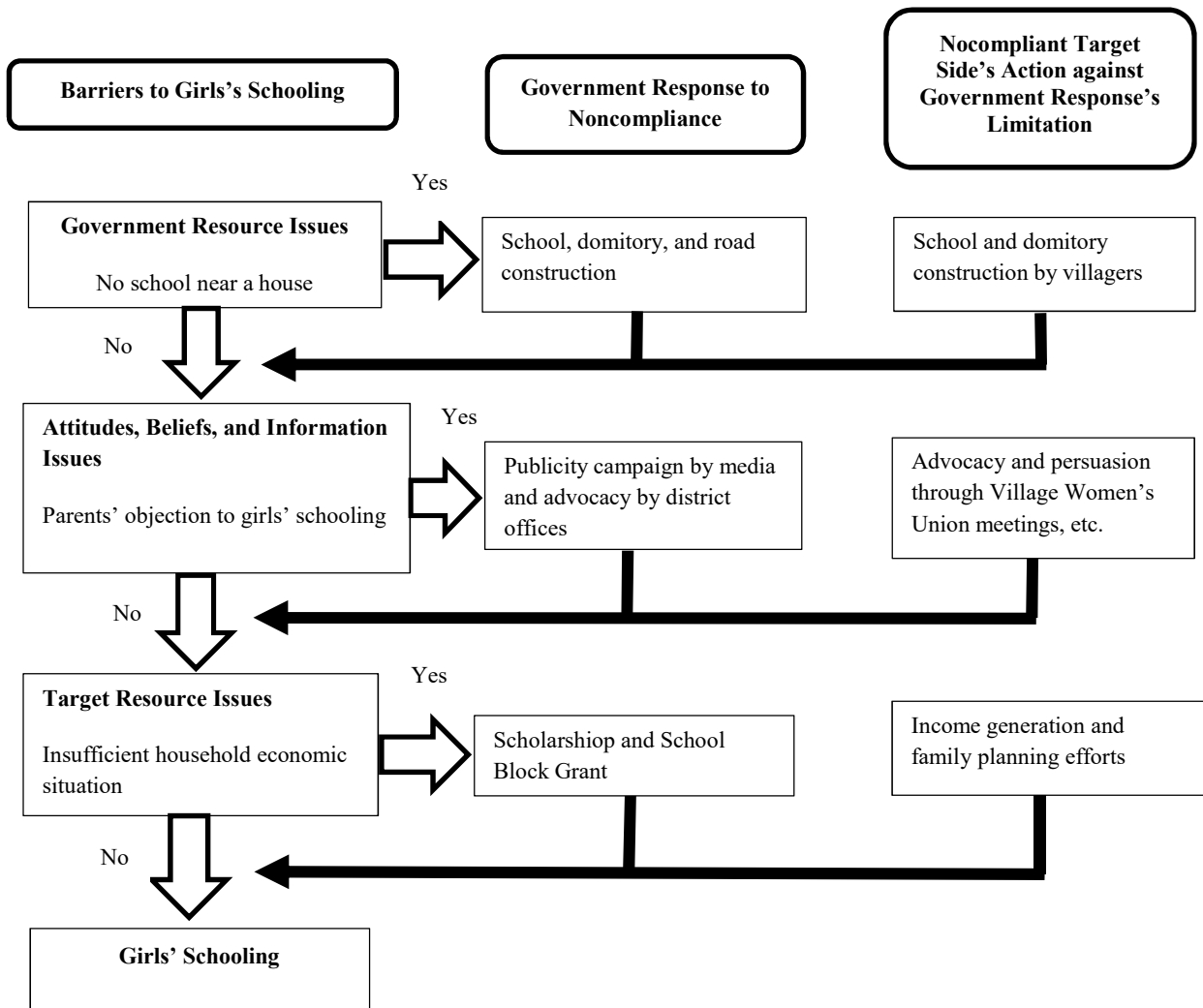


Figure 2. Relationships between barriers, government response, noncompliant target side's action, and behavioral change for girls' schooling

Government Resources

Lack of access to school is a key barrier for students. Primary schools have been constructed in almost all the villages in District A. Most students can access primary schools in their own villages. On the other hand, many secondary school students need go to a neighboring village to attend secondary school. The District Education and Sports Office divided the district into five groups. Each group of villages has one secondary school. If no secondary school is located near a student's house, road access to a secondary school is very important. Road conditions have significantly improved over the last decade in District A. The district was isolated even in the Vientiane Capital until the roads were upgraded in 2013. Now, it takes one and a half hours to drive from the center of Vientiane Capital to the center of District A; the same drive took four hours prior to 2013. In 2011, another road in District A underwent improvements. This road is still unpaved, but it improved people's access to the center of District A from their villages. Another narrow road was built from one surveyed village to the center of District A in 2007. Although its driving conditions are unpredictable in the rainy season, it brought 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 travel to school by bicycle, or motorbike from their homes.

When the government could not respond to the needs of noncompliant targets, villagers (parents of targets) themselves took action to make up for lack of government resources. Villagers constructed some school buildings and dormitories. These are cases of co-production to remove barriers for education (Osborne, et al., 2016). One of the surveyed villages opened a lower secondary school 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, District A's current number of secondary school is insufficient, and the District Education and Sports Office plans to construct two new secondary schools in the future. The official also mentioned that the

number of teachers in the District is insufficient and the quality of education does not meet government standards for secondary education.

Target Resources

In 2011, the Ministry of Education and Sports issued a decree prohibiting schools from charging official fees in primary schools after introducing the School Block Grant (SBG) program. Schools can use the grants to conduct repairs at the school, to acquire teaching and learning materials, or to pay overdue utility bills. The SBG is a component of a growing number of School Based Management (SBM) programs implemented around the world (EFA 2015 Review Group and Secretariat Group, 2014).

Even if schools do not charge fees, parents need to pay voluntarily to schools because the SBG from the GOL does not fully cover expenses. When students stay in dormitories, parents must send some money for food. Some parents complain about the difference between past and current situations: “Because the school used to be far away, children preferred to stay with family and dropped out of a school. But now students do not drop out because they believe a better life in the future. The problem is the cost of continuous study.” The official from the Department of Education and Sports in Vientiane Capital explained the relationship between school enrollment and economic conditions: “The girls’ enrollment ratio is almost the same as the boys’ in primary education. However, the girls’ enrollment ratio from primary to secondary education and in secondary education decreases compared to that of the boys. Girls work for factories or other jobs to support their families in Vientiane, or they get married in the mid of secondary school because their economic situations are not good. Girls can go to secondary school when their families are in good economic situations.”

The household economic situation is still a barrier for girls’ schooling, especially in secondary education. However, the Net Enrollment Ratio and the Gender Parity Index in primary education and secondary education have improved significantly. A village woman explained relationship between her economic condition and her daughter’s schooling: “My

household economic condition is not sufficient, but I can manage somehow to raise money for my daughter's schooling.”

Compared to 15 years ago, they can afford to care for children in District A. Two factors affected their attitudes. First, the government has promoted a market economy in villages. Villagers sold their products such as vegetables and chickens in the market. The government also encouraged village women to do a small business like a weaving. As a result, they are much better off than they used to be. Second, the number of children in one household decreased because of expansion of family planning programs in the villages. These policies brought better environment to girls' schooling.

The GOL has worked to develop early childhood care and education (ECCE) policies. The ECCE program provides pre-primary education and school readiness for children in some remote and poor communities. Students who study in pre-primary school are unlikely to repeat the same grade and drop out. In addition, the ECCE program prevents girls from dropping out of school to care for their younger brothers and sisters at home.

Attitudes 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 regarding education: “We heard the idea that boys should study and girls should work in the past, but the idea of gender equality is common now.” Another woman described the government's role regarding gender equality: “It is a good activity and a duty for all students to go to school. This is a government policy. The government trained village representatives. Village authorities taught villagers about gender equality. The village people have accepted this idea.” Both central and local officials recognized that families must understand the importance of education. When parents who do not send their children to primary school, Village Education Development Committees (VEDCs) need to persuade parents to change their attitudes and beliefs. A 2008 Ministerial Decree included a provision for the establishment of VEDCs. Although the VEDC chairperson is the village chief (or vice

chief), VEDC members include 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 these cases, the District Women's Union and Village Women's Union work with the Parents' Association to persuade parents to send their children to school.

Information

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

The Village Women's Union holds four yearly meetings open to the entire village. All village women are invited to Village Women's Union meetings even if they are not members of the Lao Women's Union. In the meetings, officials from district sector offices such as the District Education and Sports Office provide participants with information. The District Women's Union sometimes participates in meetings to promote party and government policies. Even if members of the District Women's Union do not join the Village Women's Union meetings, the head of the Village Women's Union attends the quarterly meetings held by the District Women's Union. After returning to her village, the head of the Village Women's Union can convey what she heard in the District Women's Union meeting to women villagers in the Village Women Union meetings. In the same manner, a head of the District Women's Union joins the Capital/Province Women's Union meeting and a head of the Capital/Province Women's Union joins the Central Women's union meeting. These meetings begin at the central level and gradually spread to the village level. Public policy information goes from central to village (grassroots) levels in a top-down or authoritarian manner. However, there is a reverse, bottom-up information flow in the meetings. Each

participant has a chance to voice an opinion to upper authorities in the meetings. For example, the head of the Village Women's Union can express her opinion in the District Women's Union meeting. Noncompliant situations at the grassroots level can be conveyed to central in either a bottom-up or a deliberative manner.

6. Lao Women's Union and Its Network

The Lao Women's Union can play an important role in changing behavior in the villages by spreading information and altering attitudes and beliefs. This section examines how Lao Women's Union and its network function in gender equality policymaking and policy implementation.

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. The Lao Women's Union has a network that extends from the central to the grassroots (village) level. The total female population of Laos is 3.24 million and the number of members in the Lao Women's Union is 0.93 million. The Lao Women's Union has engaged in many activities to support skills training, income generation, and women's rights awareness, including in the workplace. The Lao Women's Union also addresses emerging issues such as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking (ADB, 2004).

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the Lao Women's Union and the education sector. The Ministry of Education and Sports also houses a unit of the Lao Women's Union. Members of the Lao Women's Union in the Ministry of Education and Sports promote gender equality policies through their own jobs. When the Ministry of Education and Sports meets to discuss policies related to gender equality, the ministry invites representatives of the Lao Women's Union.

The Lao Women's Union and the Ministry of Education and Sports can collaborate on policymaking. The District Education and Sports Office does not have offices in the villages. When the District Education and Sports Office needs to disseminate their policies, they can come to Village Women's Union meetings. The president of the Village Women's Union is a

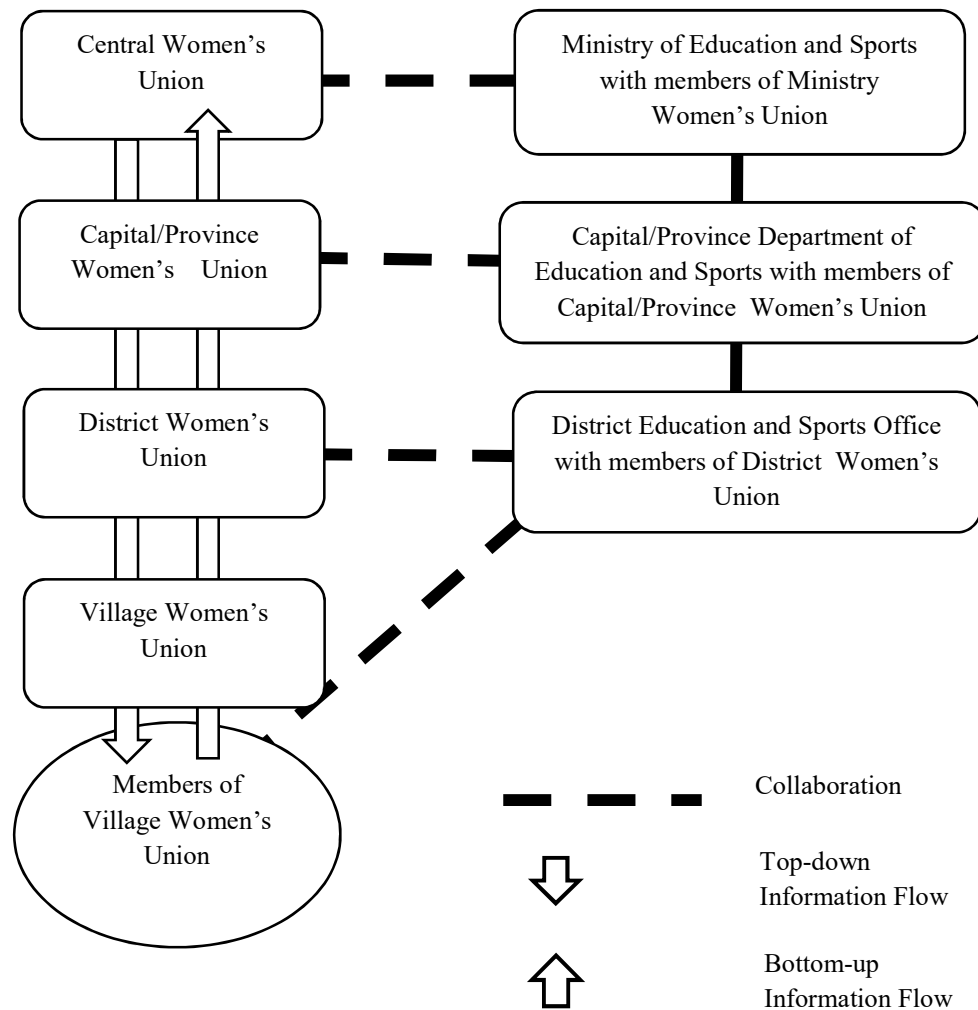


Figure 2. Collaboration between the Lao Women's Union and the Ministry of Education and Sports

member of the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC). The VEDCs aims to promote enrollment and completion, and support school management and learning achievement (Seel, et al., 2015). The Village Women's Union and the District Education and Sports Office can also collaborate on policy implementation. The members of the Village Women's Union are closely engaged in activities such as managing village funds (micro finance) and serving for ceremonies. The members act voluntarily at village level. The Lao-Tai ethnic group has a matrilineal society where inheritance passes down through the women's side of family (Lao Women's Union, 2012, p.4 in English). In three of the surveyed villages in District A, most villagers belong to the Lao-Tai ethnic group. Men often move to live with the women's family after marriage. Village women know each other from childhood

from. This social network can help break barriers in attitudes and beliefs (intergenerational cycle) and disseminate gender policies to village women.

The 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 and their own history of state-building. The Hmong ethnic group has a patrilineal society and the number of members in the Village Women’s Union is relatively small compared to the population of village women in District B. Although the government promoted the inclusive policy for all the ethnic groups, mistrust of the government historically created remains among some villagers in the surveyed villages of District B.

The Remaining Limitation of Government Response in Secondary Education

Table 1

The number of students and the GPI in primary and secondary schools 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

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. The decrease is almost the same between male students and female students except in secondary school grade 7. The main reason for the dropouts is the economic conditions of households. A mother explained the 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.” Some students, especially boys drop out because they are not interested in studying.

Table 2

The number of students and the GPI in primary and secondary schools 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

Table 2 shows the number of students and the GPI in primary and secondary schools in District B in 2015. District B is located in a mountainous area and its residents are primarily Hmong people. Although the gender parity ratio is almost 1 between primary school grade 3 and secondary school grade 4, gender disparity increases between secondary school

grade 5 and grade 7. This indicates that primary education for girls has already been accepted as a social norm and a family value, but parents and/or community 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.” For these reasons, girls often drop out of secondary school at around 15 years of age to get married. Noncompliance is connected with their safety net.

Conclusions

Government responses reduced barriers and caused children to attend primary and secondary schools. Villagers (parents of children) also worked to reduce barriers through the construction of school buildings and dormitories. Village Women’s Union members (especially the president) worked to persuade parents to send their children to attend a school in collaboration with District Education and Sports Office. By spreading information and altering attitudes and beliefs, the activities of the Village Women’ Union contribute to changing behavior in the villages. The Village Women’s Union social network also influenced behavioral changes.

Despite these improvements, the number of students enrolled in primary and secondary education decreases yearly. Although several factors contribute to the dropouts, the primary factor is the economic condition of households (lack of target resource). In District B, gender disparities increase between secondary school grade 5 and grade 7. Early marriage affects the gender disparity. Early marriage may result from the belief that the completion of lower secondary school is enough for girls or the belief that girls should get married early to ensure their future well-being. However, if early marriage is a component of the safety net in rural and remote areas, it will need more consideration of the government and take time to change noncompliant behavior in upper secondary education in District B.

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