

Feature article:

Empowering women, focus of Australian Aid

Vientiane, 27th February 2015

Empowering women so that they can find ways to increase their incomes and be more financially secure and independent is a renewed focus of the Australian Government's aid program in Laos.

Advancing gender equality and empowering women is essential for generating widespread economic development opportunities, reducing poverty and making Australia's aid program more effective. It is also important as a right of its own.

Make It Happen is the 2015 theme for International Women's Day, and in the lead up to International Women's Day on March 8th we will be marking the occasion with daily articles and insights on how the AUD43 million Laos Australia Rural Livelihoods Program helps women to become empowered.

Sub-projects within the Livelihoods Program each do significant work to promote gender equality and empower women in different ways.

This week you can read how these sub-projects are supporting the training in gender equality of women from different ethnicities, promoting the inclusion of women on financial governance boards, providing capital to women to pursue niche business opportunities, and teaching young girls how to manage their money well.

We maximise the impact that our development assistance can achieve by being sensitive to the specific needs of women in their households and in their communities. We work through NGO partners who have experience and who can enhance the Lao government's understanding of what approaches work best in different Lao provinces and communities.

While it is timely to celebrate Laos' significant achievements and progress across different parts of society to date, however, International Women's Day is also an important reminder that there are still significant challenges to overcome.

There is no 'silver bullet' solution to creating systemic changes and advancing outcomes for women on a large scale. The challenges remain staggering, but every step in the right direction is a good one.

The United Nations estimates that the Asia-Pacific region is losing up to US\$47 billion annually because of women's limited access to employment opportunities, and up to US\$30 billion annually due to gender gaps in education.

Australia has been a major development partner in Lao PDR over the last 60 years. We remain one of the largest bilateral donors to the country and are committed more than ever to being at the forefront of efforts to empower women and girls across Lao PDR. When this occurs, everyone benefits.

This feature article is the first of a series prepared by the Lao Australia Development Learning Facility (LADLF), an Australian Aid support project, as part of the International Women's Day event on March 8th



Australian Ambassador John Williams together with Australian Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP at a new Australian funded showroom opening ceremony at the Lao Disabled Women's Development Centre in Vientiane in September 2014. Australia contributes to providing opportunity for women with disabilities to display their products made to earn income for their families.

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