

Safe Shelter Services for Women Victims of Violence and Trafficking in Laos

*A Give2Asia Project
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Economic forces, cultural traditions, gender discrimination, and regional dynamics have increased the dangers of domestic violence and trafficking for women and girls in Laos. Yet when these victims try to create a new life for themselves, there is nowhere in Laos they can go to get help – health care, psychological counseling, livelihood assistance, and information about their legal rights. This \$100,000 Safe Shelter project will establish the first comprehensive women’s shelter and counseling center for victims of violence and trafficking in Laos and provide operational funding for its initial year of operations. During this first year, it is projected the center will house 70 women and girls, provide in-person counseling to 80-100 victims, and respond to over 100 cases through the counseling hotline.

I. Background

In patriarchal communities, gender discrimination and the adverse impact of economic disparity trap many women in a web of poverty, low education, poor health, and subordination in their homes and communities, as well as within the judicial system. As a result, they are vulnerable to violence and trafficking. An assessment survey of violence against women conducted by the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) and The Asia Foundation recently revealed that due to a lack of knowledge about their rights, Lao women, especially ethnic minorities, suffer from high levels of violence in both domestic and public spheres. The same survey highlights a report by the civil court that spousal violence has become a major cause of divorce. Domestic violence ranked third in the frequency of cases brought before the courts between 1996 and 2000. It moved up to second during 2001-2002. The criminal court, representing all provinces in Laos, reported that sexual violence offenses rank fourth in the frequency of cases (the first, second and third being drug, robbery and road accident cases).

Lao women have also become frequent victims of trafficking. Labor migration from Laos to Thailand is very likely to increase as strong economic, geographic and cultural dynamics continue to push women and children out of their communities to seek better opportunities. While the number of persons trafficked annually from Laos is not known, the International Labor Organization’s Rapid Assessment, “Trafficking in Children into the Worst Forms for Child Labor,” revealed that Lao girls were forced into situations of sexual exploitation or lured into exploitative labor in factories, fisheries, and as domestic workers in Thailand. Some girls were trafficked to Malaysia through Thailand. The average age of children trafficked from Laos is 15. From 2001 to 2003, there were 222 trafficked women and girls who were returned by officials from Thailand. An amazing 74% of those who returned were under 17 years of age. Among these returnees, only 47 were able to receive extremely brief counseling from the Lao Women’s Union before they were sent back to their homes. Unfortunately, many returnees are unable even to return to their homes due to threats from traffickers or because of the social stigma against them in their own communities. Due to weak social re-integration and other

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services, the number of girls who are re-trafficked continues to increase. Presently, the re-trafficking rate is 15-20%.

II. Problem Statement

These victims of violence and trafficking have little or no access to support services or assistance. The LWU does currently operate a drop-in center in Vientiane that provides some counseling to victims of domestic violence, trafficking, and rape. However, the LWU center has limited capacity and resources. Since its founding in September 2002, the center has been inundated with more than 150 cases seeking legal and psychological assistance. The small staff with limited expertise cannot adequately provide comprehensive assistance to these victims. Additionally, the center lacks a safe house for its clients; victims of violence and trafficking need a safe place to stay while they receive assistance in order to help them escape the situations that lead to their victimization.

III. Project Goals and Beneficiaries

This project aims to establish the first comprehensive services provider in Laos for women and girls who are victims of violence and trafficking. The new center, offering both safe shelter and a range of counseling services, will adopt a rights-based approach that promises to build the self-confidence of beneficiaries so that they are able to determine their own future. The comprehensive services will include legal, psychological counseling and basic economic support through the coordination of a multi-disciplinary team (social workers, health practitioners, psychologists, police, and lawyers). In addition to aiding its residents, the shelter will offer a telephone hotline to assist women in crisis that will lead to face-to-face follow up counseling.

The center will serve victims of violence against women, which in Laos ranges from domestic violence to public violence, including battery, assault, unlawful threat or coercion, forced sexual intercourse, sexual molestation, sexual exploitation against wives or co-habitants, rape and gross rape. Unwanted pregnancy, neglect, and trafficking are also regarded as violence against women. The shelter also will provide confidential protection and care for victims and witnesses of trafficking, specifically when they are asked to give testimony in court proceedings against perpetrators of trafficking. For recent trafficked returnees, the shelter will provide a temporary home to those who might be endangered by a trafficker in their home community.

IV. Project Activities

The Lao government has already donated the necessary land and other donors have already provided funds for the training of the center's counselors and advisors. The Asia Foundation now seeks funds to support the construction and operation of the new facility.

Construction

The Asia Foundation will work with the LWU to build a two-unit shelter. The main building will house the administrative offices and counseling space. The residential facilities for victims who require them will be housed in the second unit. The Japanese

Embassy in Laos has already committed US\$70,000 toward the construction of the main office building. The residential unit will have four four-person bedrooms with a shared kitchen, shower, and toilet. The Asia Foundation and LWU have deemed the residential unit the priority of the two buildings, as the construction and preparation of the main office unit will take longer and require a larger budget than the residential unit. Once the residential unit is finished, part of the building can act as office space until the main office is completed. The estimated budget for the residential unit and its capital fixtures is US\$35,000.

Equipment and Maintenance of the Residential Unit

The Foundation will help LWU to identify necessary equipment for the facility, including furniture, amenities, and utilities, to enable the shelter to provide comprehensive support to victims. The budget for these items and utilities and maintenance for one year is estimated at US\$20,000.

Operation and Staffing

The shelter will operate under the umbrella of Lao Women’s Union and will be under the supervision and administration of the Director of the Department for the Protection of Women’s Rights. The shelter will have five sections: legal aid, economic and psychological support, healthcare, training and public education, and finance and administration. Initially, it is envisioned the shelter will be staffed by six full-time personnel. The Asia Foundation and LWU expect the center to provide temporary shelter to about 70 women and girls in its first year, while an estimated 80-100 additional clients will seek face-to-face counseling, and over 100 will use the counseling hotline. The Asia Foundation estimates first-year operations costs, including staff salaries, food and supplies for residents, counseling support, and administration, at US\$30,000.

Reporting

With assistance from The Asia Foundation staff, the LWU will be responsible for project management, monitoring, and evaluation of the impact of this pioneering project. The LWU will report its findings to The Asia Foundation and donors. After such an evaluation, LWU will seek support to build the capacity of the shelter’s managers and professional personnel in areas of counseling, interviewing, data base and filing systems, family mediation, recovery skills and case monitoring.

V. Budget

1) Construction of residential unit	US\$35,000
2) Facilities and one year utilities	20,000
3) Victim support, staff salaries and administrative costs	<u>30,000</u>
Program Cost Subtotal	85,000
4) Foundation program service costs and travel	2,719
5) Indirect costs @ 14%	<u>12,281</u>
Total Grant Amount	US\$100,000

Partner background

The Lao Women's Union (LWU) was founded in 1955. The LWU is the only Party-associated women's organization that has branch offices operating at the national, provincial and village levels across the country. The LWU's mandate is to enhance the role and status of Lao women, promote gender equality in all areas of development, and protect the rights of women. The first drop-in counseling center was established in 2002 under the supervision of the Department of the Protection of Women's Rights. Domestic violence cases are the most common type at the center, followed by trafficking and rape. LWU has received technical assistance and funds for the center from UNIFEM and The Asia Foundation.

Please contact Give2Asia if you are interested in funding this project in full or in part.

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