



Country Report

Towards Safer Schools for Children: Laos

Preventing Violence Against Children in
Schools in South and Southeast Asia



Coalition for
Good Schools





About Coalition for Good Schools

The Coalition for Good Schools is a collection of leading Global South practitioners committed to preventing violence against children (VAC) in and through schools across Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Coalition elevates insights and evidence-based interventions in order to provide critical tools, data and best practices for sustainable, local solutions. This ten-country document review series has been initiated by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools, coordinated by Samya Development Resources Private Limited (SAMYA).

The Asia Hub commissioned 10 country reports on the state of VAC in and around schools in the broader region, in collaboration with core partners in each context. Each report provides an overview of how violence manifests in educational settings, explores contributing social, cultural and economic factors for VAC in each context, and provides a brief review of the policy landscape, national leadership and strategy for ending violence. While school violence is the primary focus, violence in other physical and online settings is explored. These reports are thus developed for all those working on the issue of VAC, particularly for those who see schools as an ideal entry point for its prevention.

These 10 reports are developed to stand alone, and are summarized in a scene-setting "Synthesis Report" which can be found on our website at www.coalitionforgoodschools.org.

Acknowledgements

This series of reports, produced by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools presents background information, infographics and key resources that aim to foster change and development in both schools' settings and communities in the field of prevention of Violence Against Children across Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. This would not be possible without the diverse inputs of practitioners and researchers throughout each context. The Asia Hub is grateful to the following people for their contributions:

Writers

Yoeurn Yoeurt, Senior Research Officer, This Life Cambodia

Manith Chhoeng, Research & Policy Program Lead, This Life Cambodia

Editors

Devin Faris, Coalition for Good Schools

Philip Gover, Director of Strategic Engagement, Impact Learning and Effectiveness, This Life Cambodia

Johanna Higgs, Section Lead, Impact Learning and Effectiveness, This Life Cambodia

Dr. Komal Ganotra, Founder Director, Safetitude

Anuradha Mukherjee, Consultant - Social Development & Safeguarding

Suneha Kandpal, Feminist Researcher

Expert Reviewers

Dipak Naker, Coalition for Good Schools

Pranita Achyut, Senior Director- Research & Programs, ICRW Asia

Shanaaz Mathews, University of Cape Town

Shruti Johri, Research Specialist and Published Author

Sunita Menon, Chief Thematic Officer, Breakthrough Trust

Country Expert Review

Asia Hub – Core Group Members

- Awaz Foundation (Pakistan)
- Enfold Proactive Health Trust & Kidpower (India)
- CWIN & Voice of Children (Nepal)
- This Life (Cambodia)

Graphics and Design

Macro Graphic Pvt. Ltd.

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Samya Development Resources Private Limited



Country Profile

LAOS

Population



7.633
Million¹

Leading ethnic groups



53.2%
Lao

11%
Khmou

9.2%
Hmong

3.4%
Phouthay

3.1%
Tai

2.5%
Makong

2.2%
Katong

2%
Lue

1.8%
Akha

11.6% (2015 est.)
Other

Languages



Lao (official)

French

English

Diverse ethnic languages

Age Structure



30%
0-14 years

20.6%
15-24 years

38.29%
25-54 years

5.73%
55-64 years

GDP per capita



\$2,075.4
(World Bank 2023)

Poverty Rate



23.2%

Literacy rate



87.52%

Key Findings

- ❖ Teachers are key perpetrators of corporal punishment in schools, with prevalence rates in the past 5 years ranging from 62% to 77% of children experiencing physical punishment.
- ❖ Nearly 70% of Lao children experience violent discipline at home, and more than 80% are at risk of cyberbullying due to increasing internet access.
- ❖ Sexual violence is a serious issue for both boys and girls; 4.5% of young adults (18-24 years) report experiencing sexual abuse before 18.

¹ World Bank, 2023: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr>

Overall snapshot of violence against children (VAC) in Laos

Data on violence against children (VAC) in Laos, particularly data on VAC in schools, remains scarce. According to the Laos National VAC Survey (2014)², one in six children in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) had at least one experience of physical violence before the age of 18. Almost a third of children witnessed physical violence against other children in their neighbourhood, and more than a quarter witnessed it at home. About 25% of children had suffered emotional abuse at home, and 10% had been sexually abused as children. However, only 15% of those children who reported sexual abuse received the necessary assistance, such as counseling or support services, to recover from their experiences. Overall, more than one-third of females (34.3%) and males (35.1%) experienced some form of violence during childhood, whether a single or multiple incidents.

At school, violent punishment continues and peer violence in the form of bullying is a prevalent issue, affecting an estimated 13% of children. Boys experience bullying more frequently, with 15.2% of boys reporting incidents of peer violence compared to 11.3% of girls. Bullying can manifest in various forms, and among those who experienced it, 36.3% experienced physical violence, 3.5% psychological or social exclusion, and 5.9% sexual abuse. Common factors that make these children more prone to bullying include a child's physical appearance, race, nationality, skin color, and religion.³

Laos ranked 143rd out of 186 countries in the 2021 Global Childhood Report released by Save the Children. The index evaluated each country's average performance in eight categories: child health, education, labour, marriage, childbirth and violence. The study found that between 2015 and 2019, 23.2% of elementary and secondary school-age children did not attend school and 28.2% of children between the ages of five and seventeen were forced to work. In Lao PDR, child prostitution and human trafficking are widespread practices that include the commercial sexual exploitation of minors. Poverty and a lack of law enforcement have also contributed to the rise of child sex tourism.

Prevalence of different forms of VAC

1. Corporal punishment

In Lao PDR, according to a survey carried out on VAC, teachers are found to be the most common perpetrators of physical violence against students, with most being male.⁴ Corporal punishment is still a reality in preschool and primary schools and many teachers are not aware of children's rights or child protection laws. However, the 2023 Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS III, 2023) highlighted a decrease in violent discipline, with children aged 1 to 14 experiencing physical punishment dropping from 77% to 62%. Even this drop in prevalence indicates that physical punishment is still a widespread issue in Lao schools.

Outside of school, the Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS II, 2017-18)⁵ reveals that 69% of children aged 1-14 experienced some form of violent discipline during the last month, and that 25.4% of Lao's mothers and caretakers of children aged 1-14 believe physical punishment is necessary. Furthermore, emotional violence by a parent, guardian, adult caregiver or other adult relative in childhood was experienced by 1 in 4 females (24.2%) and around 1 in 6 males (17.7%). Most females (61.9%) and a majority of males (90.6%) experienced multiple incidents of emotional violence as a child (National VAC Survey, 2017-18) according to the available data.⁶

According to the National VAC Survey (2017-18), the most reported perpetrators of physical violence

² The National VAC Survey – the first of its kind in Lao PDR – was implemented by the Lao Statistics Bureau and the National Commission for Mothers and Children in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and the Lao Women's Union, with technical and financial support from UNICEF and CDC. The nationally representative household survey, for which data were collected between October and November 2014, provides estimates of the prevalence of physical, emotional and sexual VAC and information about the circumstances in which violence occurs.

³ <http://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/vacsurvey-laos>

⁴ <http://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/vacsurvey-laos>

⁵ <https://data.opendevlopmentmekong.net/dataset/b4a30d05-7752-4a06-89d5-fec94b5900df/resource/bb792872-5b8b-4454-93cc-6705d2cd58b4/download/summary-survey-findings-report-lsisii.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/vacsurvey-laos>

among females during childhood were parents, guardians, adult caregivers or other adult relatives (11.6%).⁷ The most common perpetrators among males were peers (9.8%). Girls were most likely to experience physical violence during childhood by their mothers/stepmothers (65.2%). In comparison, boys were most likely to experience physical violence by their fathers/stepfathers (63.3%). More than a third of females (39.3%) and a quarter of males (24.7%) experienced physical injury because of physical violence during childhood. A quarter of females and males witnessed physical violence in the home during childhood, 24.6% and 24.3%, respectively.

2. Peer violence and bullying

Bullying, a form of peer violence, occurs frequently in Lao schools. According to the 2015 Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS), 19% of students in Lao PDR between the ages of 13 and 15 reported being bullied at least once in the previous 30 days and getting into a physical altercation at least once.⁸ The findings of the National Commission for Mothers and Children and the National Commission for the Advancement of Women were merged to form the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children (2017-18)⁹ to provide more comprehensive data about physical violence by peers during childhood; the commission found that males most frequently identified friends as the perpetrator of their first incident of physical violence (71.7%). A further 24.1% identified classmates/schoolmates and 4.2% identified peer neighbours as the perpetrators. Insufficient data was available among females to examine perpetrators of physical violence during childhood by peers.

3. Sexual violence and harassment

As per the National Violence Against Children Survey (2018), 10.5% of children reported being victims of sexual assault while at school. Approximately 1 in 14 females (7.3%) and 1 in 8 males (12%) reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse as a child. Other estimates find 5.9% of children experience sexual abuse at school.¹⁰ Of those who experienced sexual abuse in childhood, 63.2% of females and 79.3% of males reported experiencing more than one incident. Among those who reported sexual abuse during childhood, 8.7% of females and 12.2% of males missed school due to their experiences.

4. Cyberbullying

The availability of data on the impact of cyberbullying on students in Laos remains limited, despite the increase of access to the internet among children. However, there is growing concern that violence and harassment are taking place online, though it largely remains hidden. It is also believed that most children do not report cases of online harassment and bullying due to fear of stigma, low awareness and a lack of trust in authorities.¹¹ Despite lack of data, due to a presumed increase in cyberbullying in Laos, the Minister of Post and Telecommunications signed a new ministerial regulation in August 2020, authorising the Laos Computer Emergency Response Team to receive complaints from those affected by cyberbullying (Phonevilay, 2020). Still, no information was available regarding the number of children affected by cyberbullying or the number of complaints received (Rahamathulla, 2021).

Drivers of VAC in Laos

1. Normative influence

In Lao PDR, violence is commonly perceived as an acceptable way to discipline and educate a child. According to a survey conducted in 2011, 42% of adults believed that physical punishment is necessary to properly raise a child,¹² although this opinion varied considerably from 7% to 94% across provinces. The

⁷ <http://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/vacsurvey-laos>

⁸ <https://extranet.who.int/ncdsmicrodata/index.php/catalog/483>

⁹ <https://docs.un.org/en/cedaw/c/laos/10>

¹⁰ [https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/4516/file/The%20Situation%20of%20Children%20and%20Women%20of%20Lao%20PDR%20\(2020\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/4516/file/The%20Situation%20of%20Children%20and%20Women%20of%20Lao%20PDR%20(2020).pdf)

¹¹ <http://www.unicef.org/laos/media/7356/file/UNICEFLaoPDRChildProtection>

¹² <https://www.iccwtnispcanarc.org/upload/pdf/7556105503VIOLENCE%20AGAINST%20CHILDREN%20IN%20LAO%20PDR%20.pdf>

same study also showed that adults with no education were more likely to support such beliefs than those with higher education. Children also emulate such beliefs in their day-to-day lives. According to a survey with 13-17 year old, more than half of girls and almost 2/5 of boys mentioned that it is acceptable for a husband to beat his wife under certain circumstances; and three quarters of girls and boys believed that a woman should tolerate violence to keep the family together.¹³

2. Sexuality

Sexuality and sexual orientation are subjects largely shrouded in silence in Laos, and there is a significant evidence gap about the issue of violence experienced or perpetrated by children on account of their gender identities. According, to an Apcom report (2020), LGBTQIA+ students, both in urban and rural areas in Laos, have reported experiencing discrimination while at school.¹⁴ As a result, students tend to drop out of school at presumed higher rates as there are no policies and practices which support LGBTQIA+ students. Most participants in the Apcom study reported facing discrimination from teachers, peers, compounded by other structural barriers such as poverty and access to health services.

3. Poverty

While poverty in Laos has declined significantly over the last 25 years, there continue to be discrepancies between the urban and rural areas.¹⁵ For children living in poverty-stricken rural areas, social problems are common, which inadvertently affect their education. Where education is available, boys tend to be favoured over girls, meaning that many girls miss out on education. For children from poor backgrounds who do attend school, discrimination is common, particularly for children from minority ethnic groups.¹⁶ Cultural acceptance of child labour and poverty are significant challenges in eliminating child labour in Laos.

Due to limited livelihood options, children often play an outsized role in supporting chores, farming and family business. Due to their age and the fact that they typically work in the unorganised sector, child workers are also highly susceptible to abuse, violence and exploitation. Nearly half of all working children in the Lao PDR work in dangerous conditions and 95% of children in child labour have stopped going to school or have never gone (Lao Social Indicator Survey II, 2017).

4. Conflict

Laos suffered from a civil war between 1959 and 1975, which maintains a significant impact on children's education. While the country has recovered for the most part from the conflict, the effects can still be felt on the education system and on children's safe access to schooling.¹⁷ Lao PDR received more bombs per person than any other country in the world.¹⁸ Up to 30% of the bombs dropped during the Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War, were never detonated or disposed of. As a result, unexploded ordinance (UXO) contamination in Lao PDR can pose a fatal risk to children trying to access schools, especially in rural areas. This includes large bombs, rockets, grenades, artillery munitions, mortars, landmines, cluster munitions and submunitions. Children are especially susceptible to UXO; for example in cases where they lack literacy or are too young to read, any posted warning notices may be incomprehensible. According to the NRA (2019), children playing with UXOs without realising what they are accounted for the bulk of UXO accidents in 2019 (UNICEF, Lao PDR, 2022). It is also much more common for children than for adults to die from landmine blast injuries; of the children who are injured and survive, only a few will have access to prostheses (UNICEF, Lao PDR, 2022).

¹³ <https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/941/file/UNILAO2018.pdf>

¹⁴ http://www.apcom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-11-26_Report_APCOM_FinanceInc_LaoPDR_Rev_2-withLogos.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/20/lao-pdr-poverty-continues-to-decline-but-progress-under-threat>

¹⁶ <https://borgenproject.org/facts-about-poverty-in-laos/>

¹⁷ <http://www.thelaoexperience.com/education-in-laos-part-i-the-beginning-of-a-formalized-school>

¹⁸ See <https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/7356/file/UNICEF%20Lao%20PDR%20Child%20Protection%20>

Budget and Policy

The law on preventing and combating violence against women and children in Laos, previously established by the government in 2015, forbids violence against women and children in all contexts, including sexual, emotional, physical and economic. Physical punishment is also forbidden in the criminal justice system and in schools under the 2017 Penal Code revision.

Laos officially outlawed corporal punishment to protect children from all forms of violent punishment, part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at bolstering child protection and addressing VAC in all environments, including homes, schools and online spaces. The Ministry of Justice celebrated this milestone on 30 April 2023, marking a crucial step towards safeguarding children's rights. This shows the nation's commitment to the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action for the Elimination of VAC. The amended Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children was also enacted in August 2023, underscoring the government's commitment to aligning with the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of VAC 2016-2025. While there are plans in place to prevent and eliminate violence against women and children, challenges continue in both the implementation and general awareness of these laws, with ongoing challenges in creating effective complaint mechanisms. As a result, there remain an estimated 44% of child victims who do not seek any help or demand accountability from the accused.¹⁹

Prevention and Response to VAC

The National Commission for Mothers and Children and the National Commission for the Advancement of Women developed Lao PDR's first National Plan of Action on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and VAC 2014-2020. The government also committed to carrying out ASEAN Member State Action 3.22 of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action for the Elimination of VAC 2016-2025, which mandates that all ASEAN Member States forbid physical punishment of children in any context. The government then created a second five-year National Plan of Action on Mothers and Children (2021-2025).²⁰ The current plan includes specific guidelines on multi-sectoral cooperation to prevent and respond to VAC in priority areas.

Taking action to reduce VAC in schools and foster better learning environments, civil society groups like Aide et Action have been training teachers on inclusive education, child rights and participation and child development since 2019 to provide inclusive and child-friendly pre-primary and primary school environments.²¹ UN agencies have also worked with the government of Laos to establish a child-friendly complaint mechanism on abuse, exploitation and VAC.

Institutional Mapping of the country to deal with VAC



¹⁹ <https://laopdr.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/CCA%2012072021.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/national-plan-action-mothers-and-children-20212025>

²¹ <https://action-education.org/en/laos-training-teachers-in-child-rights/>

Suggestions on the Way Forward

As the understanding of safety in educational environments continues to evolve, there is increasing recognition of schools as spaces where non-violent and just societies can be co-created. The findings presented here aim to inform a growing network of national and regional practitioners, policymakers, civil society groups, researchers and funders committed to preventing all forms of violence within schools in Laos.

While the Coalition for Good Schools encourages stakeholders to review the full recommendations outlined in the regional synthesis report, insights from the Asia Hub highlight key areas for action:

- **Education delivery system as an entry-point:** *The education system offers a strategic avenue for the prevention of violence against children. Effective multi-sectoral government action at the national level is crucial for catalysing these interventions.*
- **Children's experience and agency:** *Prioritising children's lived experiences within schools and fostering their agency should be central in education policies and interventions.*
- **Whole-school approach:** *Implementing a comprehensive, whole-school strategy that nurtures a positive school culture and upholds the inherent dignity of every child can produce long-term outcomes. Meaningful engagement with teachers, school staff, and the local community is essential for the success of such initiatives.*
- **Knowledge generation and dissemination:** *Ongoing documentation, sharing, and expansion of knowledge and evidence is vital for deepening understanding of effective interventions, strengthening local efforts and supporting scale through the education sector.*

There are proven solutions to end violence, and with collective effort, violence can be prevented within our lifetime. The efforts of Action Education, ChildFund Laos, and World Vision continue to reflect a small but growing movement dedicated to violence prevention in Laos, but deeper focus on VAC in schools - and a deeper collaboration between government and civil society - is still needed to ensure that a strengthened legal framework is met with effective change in schools. For this, foundational interventions are required in all schools in Laos, integrated into the education system itself.

Effective foundational interventions should incorporate several core elements:

- **Recognising schools' role in nurturing and developing children's potential.**
- **Promoting justice, equality, and empathy as foundational school values.**
- **Affirming children's rights and agency within the educational context.**
- **Supporting progressive pedagogies that encourage positive change.**
- **Honouring the dignity of every child, irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, caste, creed, or other categorisations.**

Prevention programmes must also adopt an intersectional perspective that acknowledges the overlapping and reinforcing characteristics that shape children's unique experiences of violence. This approach recognises that certain groups of children may face increased risks and that the severity and frequency of violence can vary considerably.

While sometimes sites of violence, schools also hold significant potential as primary sites for learning and implementing strategies to prevent it. School-based initiatives can yield multiple positive outcomes, serving as catalysts for broader change.

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