

# Feature Article:

## Everyday role models amongst ethnic women

Vientiane, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2015

As a woman who grew up in a remote rural setting in Nong, one of the poorest districts in Savannakhet, Ms. Chonekham Somchanmavong has come a long way despite being constantly unsure of what the future would bring as a child.

Like many young girls from ethnic communities in rural Laos, her parents asked her to leave school when she was 15 to take care of her younger sisters.

Chonekham is now 38, married with four children, lives in a comfortable home and even co-manages a small restaurant with her family. However, she has devoted most of the past twenty years to working in a role that has enabled her to focus on helping other poor women, children and people with disability to improve their lives.

Ms Chonekham has been recruited to work as a facilitator on the Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods project, an Australian Government-funded initiative. Australia's aid program in Laos committed A\$43 million (2012-16) to promote women's economic empowerment through the Laos Australia Rural Livelihoods Program.

The program is being implemented in Champasack, Salavan and Savannakhet Provinces with support from NGOs, UN agencies and local government partners. Its main objective is to increase the economic security and resilience of poor women and men in rural areas by providing greater and inclusive access to social protection, financial services, productive assets and opportunities to generate income.

Through her own experiences growing up as child in Savannakhet and her extensive work in remote areas of Laos, Ms Chonekham knows the difficulties that women of some ethnic groups face.

For example, like most women in Laos, women from non Lao-Tai speaking groups such as Makong and Tri wake before dawn to do most household chores, such as fetching water from nearby stream or well, cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and livestock, looking for food, and helping with all manner of other family livelihood activities.

"Men's and women's roles in some ethnic groups such as Makong are defined by our traditions. Household chores are perceived as women's work while clearing land and building houses belong to men," said Chonekham.

"I think being an ethnic woman has challenges when it comes to working with many local authorities because they consist of mostly men in key positions. We women feel that they don't easily listen to us and often have doubt about our capabilities," said added. "I don't have this difficulty myself but I know many women who do."

Chonekham started working in the development sector more than 20 years ago, first as a cook and cleaner with an NGO. Over time she progressed to work as a procurement officer where she would research market prices and buy goods (such as livestock equipment and feed) to be distributed amongst target groups. Over time, her subsequent roles have since allowed her to engage more directly with women, children and people with disabilities.

Chonekham, who only completed lower secondary school, said it was tough at the beginning.

“Sometimes I would ride my motorbike on a long difficult journey alone to work in a rural community from dawn, and I would not return home until very late at night. I would have to sleep there if it was too late.”

Sometimes my motorbike got stuck in the mud or broke down in the middle of the road. So I had to get help from locals. I was afraid of such a journey at first but gradually I got used to it,” she added.

Chonekham is excited to be working with the program and help improve living conditions of ethnic women, children and people with disability in Sepon district. A key aspect of achieving these program outcomes begins with training on gender issues for national staff members to ensure that they understand how to involve women from ethnic groups more closely in the program’s activities.

“It is going to be tough but I am confident that through the support from the Australian Government and local authorities, combined with my experiences working in this sector, gradual progress will be made,” Chonekham said. “It’s exciting to be a part of it.”

Chonekham is not the only program staff with ethnic roots in the Livelihoods Program who is excited with the prospects of economic empowerment amongst women. “Having started to work with the GIZ project called ‘Access to Finance for the Poor’, I became a reference person for Makong women in my village who want to learn more about dealing with financial matters.” said Vonemany Sayavong, a Microfinance Field Assistant with GIZ in Sepon.

Vonemany’s sentiment is shared by Ms Monethong Kuthoudom, a young Kmou credit officer working for Xainiyom non-deposit taking Microfinance Institution that is supported by a project implemented by Bank of Lao PDR with technical assistance from UNCDF. “Since I joined the team as a credit officer more than a year ago, the number of women receiving financial support has increased a lot because as women like them, we make it easier for them to consider taking out loans,” she said.

“For example, our products address their specific needs, and they can borrow money if they can show us that they have steady income, and have a credible guarantor,” she said.

Australia promotes gender equality and inclusive development as critical cross-cutting themes of its aid program. In Australian supported programs, women and in particular women from ethnic groups have been recruited to better reach and empower their peers.

*This article is part of a series prepared by Laos-Australia Development Learning Facility, an Australian Aid Project, leading up to International Women’s Day on March 8th*



Chonekham attending the gender training run by SPSL on how to select target households that focus on women, children and people with disabilities

Photo by: Somsavath Phanthady

For more information:  
Somsavath Phanthady  
M: 020 5505 3097  
E: Somsavath.phanthady@ladlf.com