

Promoting Gender Equality in the National University of Laos

A Seminar on Gender Issues in Academia with Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath

On January 10, 2023, the CSEAS Gender Equality Promotion Committee held its first in-person Seminar on Gender Issues in Academia in three years, after suspending the seminars due to the pandemic. The guest speaker, Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath, the Director of the Gender Studies Center of the National University of Laos and a gender specialist, presented on “Promoting Gender Equality in the National University of Laos.” Commentary was provided by Dr. Sharon Bong from Monash University Malaysia, and a discussion was moderated by Professor Chika Obiya as the person in charge of the Gender Equality Promotion Committee.

The Gender Gap in Japan and Kyoto University

Professor Obiya began the seminar by providing some information about the gender gap situation in Japan and Kyoto University. In 2022, Japan ranked 116 among 126 countries in terms of the global gender gap index ([World Economic Forum 2022](#)). Among a total of 86 national universities in Japan, Kyoto University ranks 75th ([The Japan Association of National Universities 2022](#)). From this academic year, Kyoto University has entered the second phase of its [Gender Equality Promotion Action Plan](#), which includes more concrete measures to promote gender equalities. This includes measures to increase the number of female faculty, to support female professors to balance both academic and family life, and to help with childcare. The CSEAS committee also has its own action plan within the university’s framework. The committee takes measures to promote childcare on the campus, provides information about the current gender situation in the Center on its [home page](#), and so on. Professor Obiya noted that although progress is very slow and step-by-step, the committee is doing something for the future.

The National University of Laos (NUOL): Its History and Background

Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath provided a history of the National University of Laos. It is the oldest university in Laos, but it is very young compared to universities abroad. Before independence, Sisavangvong University was founded in 1958 with faculties including law and administration, medical sciences, and pedagogy. At the time, only very few and wealthy people could access higher education, so the university was not well known. Before independence, the education system used French, not Lao, language. In 1970, the pedagogy department was developed and became the Pedagogy Institute, which consisted of two colleges, the Vientiane Pedagogy College and the Vientiane Higher Diploma of Pedagogy, which focused on producing teachers in Laos.

However, beginning in 1954, there were two regimes in Laos, the Pathet Lao and the royal government. Na Khao University of Pedagogy in Vieng Xai, a liberated zone, belonged to the Pathet Lao side. This university had departments of literature and language, history, geography, biology, and chemistry. After independence, the University of Vientiane Pedagogy was created by combining the Vientiane Higher Diploma of Pedagogy and Na Khao University of Pedagogy in Vieng Xai, with the main campus in Vientiane. At the same time, Vientiane had many educational institutes that belonged to each ministry, for example the Ministry of Health Sciences, the Ministry of Communication and Transportation, the Ministry of Justice, and so on. Finally, in 1996, ten 10 educational institutes merged to become the National University of Laos (NUOL).

In the beginning, NUOL had eight faculties with five campuses. Today, there are 13 faculties, five campuses, and over 22,000 students. This number has decreased due to the pandemic; normally the university has approximately 23-25,000 students, but many have dropped out. Today Laos has five main universities: Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet University in Savannakhet Province, Champasak University in Champasak Province, and the National University of Laos and the Health Sciences University in Vientiane.

The Gender Gap and Gender Studies in NUOL

The National University of Laos has only seriously collected sex-disaggregated statistics since 2016. The number of staff, including female staff, has decreased from 1,965 in 2016 to 1,704 in 2023. In the same period, the number of female academic faculty has increased slightly from 621 to 625. The overall numbers have reduced because the government has reduced the number of new government officers every year. For example, this academic year, only 800 new officers were allocated, not only for the Ministry of Education, but for all ministries across the country. The National University of Laos receives roughly ten staff each year. Therefore, the numbers are decreasing, including the number of professors, as they retire or move to another ministry and are not replaced.

In the past, the university had one female professor, in the faculty of engineering. Today, there are more female professors, but the number remains lower than the number of male professors. In terms of university leadership, since its founding in 1996, NUOL has had only one female vice president. She is currently in her second term, which will expire next year. It is unlikely that another female vice president will replace her, meaning that from 2024, there will be no female leader. The National University follows the government policies to promote gender equality. As the policy of the government is to promote women and ethnicities in Laos, every time there is a selection process, the leaders of the Ministry of Education suggest selecting female leaders, but it is quite difficult.

There is currently no gender studies program in either the BA or MA programs at NUOL. There are gender study subjects in the undergraduate social work and social development programs, and the International Development Studies masters' program includes a subject on gender participation and development. Some faculties have integrated gender into their teaching plan. For example, the Faculty of Law integrates gender in some subjects. Currently, NUOL is developing a comprehensive sexuality curriculum and writing a textbook for a subject to be taught in the Lao Studies course. This is supported by the UNFPA. Lao Studies consists of Lao history, Lao geography, and population studies. A comprehensive sexuality of Laos subject will be added to this course, and it is expected to be taught next academic year. All NUOL students

must take the Lao Studies 1 course, which means that all students will have to study this subject in their first year.

The Gender Studies Center at NUOL and the Importance of a Name

Before the university became NUOL, there was a women's study center, but it was terminated due to a lack of human resources. Then in 2010, the Faculty of Social Science included a gender studies center in its long-term strategy plan. Although there were few academic staff that specialized in gender issues, the Dean had the idea to establish the gender studies center. In 2018 and 2019, a team was appointed to make preparations and finally in 2021, the Gender Studies Center was founded by the National University of Laos.

If one learns Lao language, you may know that "gender" in Lao is translated into *bod bat ying sai*, where *bod bat* means "roles" and *ying sai* means "female and male." Therefore, the translation of "gender" is actually "gender roles." When discussing the name of the Center, the senior staff wanted to use the words *bod bat ying sai*, but the junior academic staff preferred to use *phed phawa*, or "gender studies" rather than "gender roles." This required many negotiations, because in Laos, when you talk about gender, most people think about gender as gender roles. However, this does not cover the full meaning of gender. In the end, the six junior staff convinced some senior staff and the university vice president, who was a specialist in Lao language, to approve the name of *Soun Phed Phawa Sueksa* (Gender Studies Center), not the name *Soun Sueksa Bod Bat Ying Sai* (Center for the Studies of Gender Roles). The name of *phed phawa sueksa* includes LGBTQ, so therefore the name of the center itself promotes gender equality by including every gender. Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath and her team are very proud of this and recognize it as one victory that was won at the beginning of the Center.

The Center has four units: the planning and collaboration, training and academic service, research, and information units. The training and academic service unit is developing a training program on gender sensitivity for land management staff for the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture (supported by GIZ) and it has provided a training

course for the Ministry of Justice and the Institute of Politics and Administration. The Center has conducted research on comprehensive sexuality among the parents of youth in Bokeo and Udomxai and our team members have conducted research in different fields, including joining a social assessment for a highway project. The Center's team members are specialists in gender and different disciplines. For example, one member conducts research on gender and supply chains and another on development projects.

The Center is also creating a gender studies curriculum for an international undergraduate program, developing benchmarks in consultation with the Women's Studies Department at Chiang Mai University and the Philippine Normal University. The Center also conducted a survey on market needs with civil society organizations, provides consultancy services for international agencies such as CIGAR, and is sometimes invited to join projects outside the university. Most of the staff of the Center have more than one position, working in the Center and for another department. Because the Gender Studies Center was founded during the pandemic, it has been very difficult to do many gender awareness raising activities yet. Budget constraints are also a challenge.

Overcoming the Challenges for Women in NUOL

Female academic staff, like women across Laos, must take care of their families. NUOL does not have a gender equality action plan. Although there is a Women's Advancement Committee, it is an "add-on" and therefore makes additional work for the administration. Among the staff, the number of women PhD holders is increasing, from 28 in 2016 to 44 in 2023. The number of women with master's degrees has also increased. This is because there are many master's programs at the university, so women can complete a master's program within the country. Before, it was difficult for female academic staff. Even though they want to upgrade their credentials and attain an MA or a PhD, they must look after their children and so they decide not to leave. But now that there are MA programs in the country, they have more opportunities to study.

The issue of leaving the family is a challenge not only in terms of attaining a higher education degree, but also for gaining field or work experience. Women who have an opportunity to attend a training, work in the field, or study abroad reject these opportunities, citing the need to take care of their children or “family matters” in general. In this situation, it is critical to encourage men to support women and to implement childcare support mechanisms. Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath encourages the NUOL administration to subsidize childcare for staff members and/or to provide free education for the children of university staff. She is also considering holding an annual event for the families of staff members, so that they may have a chance to exchange about how families can support the staff to improve and upgrade their academic skills.