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UN Volunteer Victoria Dart (left) serves as a Gender-Based Violence Specialist at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), while Sarah Tae (right) is a Gender Programme Officer at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

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Facing unseen violence: What can youth do to end gender-based violence by 2030 in Lao PDR?

Gender-based violence is referred to as a 'Shadow Pandemic', and the issue continues to be critical. We spoke to two UN Volunteers currently working on this issue in Lao PDR: Victoria Dart, Gender-Based Violence Specialist at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Sarah Tae, Gender Programme Officer at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

According to UN Women, one in three women and girls experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, mostly by an intimate partner. The situation has deteriorated since the outbreak of COVID-19. Calls to helplines reporting violence have increased five-fold in some countries, and in Lao PDR, the Women's Union Counselling and Protection Centre have reported a significant increase in the number of calls they have received. COVID-19 has not only increased the likelihood of violence, but has strained essential services, making it even more difficult for women to get support.

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In her role with UNFPA, Victoria implements a number of programmes that aim to prevent and respond to GBV in Lao PDR. This includes working at the national level, providing guidance to the government to develop policies, action plans and operating procedures for sectors. She also administers interventions on the ground, such as setting up new protection shelters for survivors of violence or rolling out manuals to engage men in the villages on gender equality and prevention of violence. Another area is coordinating development partners and government to ensure women and girls' rights are protected in both development and humanitarian contexts.

"Lao PDR has a robust national legal and policy framework and strong government bodies overseeing prevention and response to GBV. Yet, 30 per cent of women who have ever been in a relationship in Lao PDR have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence by a male partner in their lifetime. We need to close the gap between the policy and legal framework, and implementation on the ground," Victoria states.

Victoria believes that youth have a critical role to play in preventing GBV.

“ Young men and women should be actively engaged in comprehensive sexuality education, learning and talking about healthy and respectful relationships and dismantling the harmful cultural norms about how boys and girls should behave. --Victoria Dart, UN Volunteer Gender-Based Violence Specialist with UNFPA

"Gender-based violence is a symptom of gender inequality," Victoria continues, "so creating equal opportunities and access to resources – like higher education – for girls and boys will help to combat that."

At UNDP, Sarah is a Gender Programme Officer currently working on a joint project to respond to survivors of violence and prevent violence from occurring in the first place. The Khan Hom Project ("khan hom" means umbrella in Lao), refers to the need for all sections of society to come together to protect women and eliminate violence.

Sarah shares that youth, especially young men and boys, have an important

role to play to end violence against women:

“ Despite the fact that most cases of violence against women are committed by men, the focus is predominantly on how women can protect themselves from violence or stand up for their rights. Young people, especially men and boys, should have zero tolerance for any type of violence or discrimination against women, and hold each other accountable for their words and actions. -
-Sarah Tae, UN Volunteer Gender Programme Officer with UNDP

"Gender-based violence is a serious violation of human rights," Sarah asserts. "As young people, we can start making a difference right now, starting with our own circles. You are the majority of the society; you have the power to do it. Call out comments that are discriminatory and sexual harassment masked as 'just a joke'. Together, we can make a step forward to eliminate gender-based violence."



<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>



<https://www.un.org/en/observances/ending-violence-against-women-day>



<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>



• Gender-based Violence • 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence

Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 3: Good health and well-being** **SDG 5: Gender equality** **SDG 10: Reduced inequalities** **SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**