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**Speech by H.E.Ms Bounpheng Mounphoxay, Minister to the Prime Minister's Office, Head of the Public Administration and Civil Service Authority, Vice-Chairperson of the Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women at the East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting, 30 June 2006, Tokyo, Japan**

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- Mr. Chairman,
- Distinguished Guests,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and high honor for me to represent the Government of the Lao PDR to participate in the East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting hosted by the Japanese Government.

On behalf of the National Commission for the Advancement of women ( NCAW ) and on my own behalf, I would like to express our sincere thanks to the Japanese Government and the organizing committee of this meeting for the kind invitation extended to our delegation to attend the meeting and share views with you on the achievements and progress made on the role of gender mainstreaming in the Lao PDR.

- Distinguished Guests,

As we are all aware, the Fourth International Women Conference marks an important step forward in building up the capacity for women as well as a significant event in promoting the advancement of women; in particular the Conference unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Platform for Action consisting of 12 critical areas of concerns to women across the planet. Likewise, addressing women's problems in each area constitutes an immediate need for the promotion of equal rights of men and women as well as for the emancipation of women. As far as the Lao PDR is concerned, the country has made substantial progress and gained key results in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and gender mainstreaming activities that can be summarized as follows:

1. The improvement and enactment of legal system for protecting gender equality rights:

The Lao PDR adopted its first Constitution in 1991 whose articles 22 and 24 serve as legal guarantee for gender equality rights in all aspects of life. In 2003, the National Assembly approved the amended Constitution with articles 35 and 37 also guaranteeing gender equality rights. In late 2004, the National Assembly endorsed the Law on the Development and Protection of Women. The said Law has, inter-alia, defined the basic contents, measures to protect the legitimate interests of women with an emphasis on gender equality; the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; the prevention and fight against trafficking in women and children; combating acts of domestic violence against

women and children; creating enabling conditions for women to participate and serve as a force in national development and defense.

2. The establishment of a mechanism for ensuring the promotion for the advancement of women:

Over the past five decades, the Lao Women's Union ( LWU ), a mass organization, has striven vigorously to unite and mobilize Lao women of all ethnic groups to participate in the national liberation movement in past time as well as in the current task of national development and defense. To date, the LWU has made achievements in a number of areas thus uplifting the role of women and gradually realizing gender equality.

Given the need to set up a specific mechanism responsible for the advancement of women and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action so as to take gender mainstreaming activities to a new height, the Lao Government decided in 2003 to establish the National Commission for the Advancement of Women ( NCAW ) whose key role and mandate are as follows:

- Act as a functional body for the study, formulation of policy and strategic plan for the advancement of women in every aspect;
- Serve as a focal point coordinating closely with all agencies concerned, both domestic and overseas, in the implementation of the Government's policy on gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women;

We are gratified to note that over a period of time, the organizational structure of the NCAW has been gradually improved and consolidated in a systematic manner. As of now, a NCAW unit has been established in every province, the capital and almost in every Ministry and equivalent Ministry. This undertaking will be further expanded to the district, village and grass root levels. After its inception, the NCAW has completed the drafting of the national strategy plan for the advancement of women for 2006-2010 that was later approved by the Government in the end of January, 2006. The NCAW has actively contributed to raising the ratio of women in the political scene and leading positions at different levels namely: in the legislative organ, the number of female parliamentarians has increased from 9 % in the Third Legislature to 25 % in the current Sixth Legislature of the National Assembly; in the executive organ, there is an increase of women at the rank of Ministers and Vice Ministers at the reshuffled Government Cabinet.

Apart from the above mentioned functional body, there are also:

- The Gender Resource Information and Development Center ( GRID ) attached to the Lao Women's Union which is the first of its kind to develop gender mainstreaming in the Lao PDR.
- The Women Parliamentarian Caucus has the duty to assist the Standing Committee of the National Assembly in the consideration, analytical study and decision making of key issues relating to the rights and legitimate interests of women and children.

- The Lao Association of Parliamentarians on Population and Development whose task is to raise awareness of the Parliamentarians about the need to promote gender equality, population and development issues.
- Mr. Chairman,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although activities on gender equality in the Lao PDR have been done relatively well, Lao women and children are still faced with numerous impediments and challenges such as: poverty, education disparity and lack of access to health services including inadequate information on reproductive health especially in rural and remote areas, the remnant of old stereotype; low level perception of the general public on gender issues. All this will continue to pose a daunting challenge for the implementation of gender equality in the society and family.

To address the said challenges in accordance with the policy of the Party and Government on gender equality as well as with the UN Millennium Development Goals, the Lao PDR will continue to implement the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy ( NGPES ) in general terms, and in specific terms the National Strategy Plan for the Advancement of Women ( 2006-2010 ) that was approved by the Government in late January 2006 with a focus on 5 major programs as follows:

1. Enhance women's participation in the implementation of the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy ( NGPES ) for the entire population and women themselves.
2. Promote the education of women and girls with a view to gradually matching up with their male counterparts.
3. Improve women's access to healthcare services.
4. Increase the number of women in decision making positions at all levels.
5. Build up capacity for organizations/national machinery that protect the rights and promote the advancement of women.

In each program, target goals have been earmarked including the measures for its implementation from now till 2010. Here, priority would be placed on the coordination and cooperation with friendly countries in the region, international organizations and NGOs so as to render the development of gender mainstreaming more efficient, in particular the sharing of information and best practices with countries in the region with an emphasis on the following issues:

- The dissemination of the National Strategy Plan for the Advancement of Women in order to raise awareness and responsibility of the entire society for that cause coupled with the capacity building for the national machinery dealing with the advancement and protection of women's rights.
- Women's participation in decision making level.
- The elimination of domestic violence and prevention of human trafficking.
- The improvement of income generation for women.
- The improvement of education disparity between men and women.

- The improvement of women's access to health services; HIV/AIDS problem.
- Mr. Chairman,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

To achieve the above mentioned tasks, the NCAW together with the Lao Women's Union will closely work in harmony in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation exercise of the activities relating to gender equality and the advancement of women.

The Lao PDR is firmly committed to further implementing the set forth objectives for the advancement and status of Lao women. In this undertaking, we strongly hope that friendly countries as well as international organizations in the region will continue to provide support and assistance towards this end.

Once again, I wish the meeting a brilliant success.

I thank you.