

# The Feminization of Modernity

A Case Study of Women Migrant Workers  
in a Lao Garment Factory

Latdavone Khamphouvong

Critical  
Perspectives  
on Regional  
Integration

13

L a o s  
in Transition

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The Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series is the product of teaching and research at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University. It draws on primary postgraduate research undertaken for the dissertation in the Center’s International Masters of Social Science (Development Studies) program. The focus of the program is to consider the processes and consequences of the increasing interconnections and regionalization between the five mainland Southeast Asian countries (Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam), and specifically to examine the relations, exchanges and encounters within the context of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

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## Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series

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## Series Foreword

The monographs that comprise the Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series have emerged from dissertations based on original primary field research, and written as a major part of the requirements for the Master of Social Science (Development Studies) program of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

As Senior Editorial Adviser, I was engaged by the Center to conduct an overview of the dissertations—dating back to 2001 and now well over 100 pieces of work—and select which of them would best illustrate the quality of graduate student research. This was by no means an easy task, but it was decided to choose primarily those written in the past few years, given that empirical research in social science tends to date rapidly. Another consideration was that the monographs should give expression to the main theme of the series of Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration.

As the selection and editorial work proceeded it was then decided to organize the publications into sub-series focused on different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The first several volumes focus on Myanmar, covering such subjects as livelihood strategies, changing ethnic identities, borders and boundary-crossing, and the commoditization of culture within the context of ethnic tourism. Following volumes are devoted to Thailand, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The series also illustrates the concern to bring together social science and natural science knowledge in order to further the understanding of sustainable development issues. Over some 20 years Chiang Mai University has developed considerable research expertise in such fields as resource management, environmental impact assessment, upland agricultural systems and indigenous knowledge, health, and ethnic and gender relations. Teaching and research in development issues also deploys social science concepts within the development field to address decision-making, policy and practice, and the responses and adaptations of local populations.

This current monograph series also focuses on the processes of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental change among populations and territories undergoing rapid transformations within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

*Victor T. King*

Senior Editorial Adviser, Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration Series

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## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ALGI	Association of the Lao Garment Industry
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
DCTPC	Department of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GMS	Greater Mekong Sub-region
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LFNC	Lao Front for National Construction
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NUOL	National University of Laos
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
USA	United States of America
VITA	Vientiane Capital Industrial and Trade Area
VUDMC	Vientiane Urban Development Management Committee
WTO	World Trade Organization



## Glossary of Terms

<i>barn nork</i>	rural/remote area
<i>bor hu nung seu</i>	uneducated
<i>boun cuang heua</i>	boat racing festival
<i>boun that luang</i>	That Luang festival day
<i>chai gneon keng</i>	better at spending money than saving it
Jumbo or <i>tuk tuk</i>	auto rickshaw
<i>kerk nung seu</i>	illiterate
<i>kon nai maung</i>	urban people
<i>koun</i>	easy to sleep with
<i>kum ma korn kor sang</i>	construction worker
<i>mee kub khai</i>	noodles with eggs
<i>mia noy</i>	mistress or second wife
<i>na and hai farming</i>	wet land and upland fields
<i>noung seu sa sai diev</i>	wearing tank tops
<i>pai lok lin</i>	go out or enjoy outings
<i>phai yar</i>	make the roof using grass
<i>san phar heun</i>	make the walls of the house with bamboo
<i>san sad</i>	weave mats with grass as material
<i>san tip kao</i>	make rice baskets
<i>sao ban nork</i>	country girls
<i>sao hong gnarn bor dee</i>	factory girls are not good
<i>sao kai tau or mia noy</i>	provide sex for money, or a mistress
<i>seua sa sai diev</i>	tank tops

<i>sinh</i>	Lao skirts
<i>sinh phai</i>	Lao cotton skirt
<i>teng gnarn tea noy</i>	teenage marriage
<i>thansamay</i>	up-to-date
<i>tid nee</i>	debt
<i>touk jai</i>	very worried
<i>van heng khaum sook</i>	paradise/happiness day
<i>van sin</i>	holiday for Buddhist baptism - eighth and fifteenth of each month

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*Latdavone Khamphouvong*

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### Background

When the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) was established in 1975, the Government of Laos (GoL) introduced a new regime based on socialist principles and attempted to industrialize the country. Since then, the GoL has gradually and formally changed to create private enterprise sectors, particularly through the adoption of the 'New Economic Mechanism' (NEM) in 1986. Under the NEM's policies, Lao PDR has been transformed into a market-oriented economy, and has also converted from an agricultural, subsistence-based economy into a commodity-driven production. The GoL has enhanced both foreign and domestic investments to expand the productive capacity and the growth of businesses and services, in order to link with the regional and international economy.

The NEM was also the beginning of transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented one, where farmers were encouraged to produce for the market and the state monopoly on trade was removed. As the number of state enterprises fell, private firms were allowed to set-up and operate. The government also promoted foreign investment, and foreign assistance thereafter increased (Phouxay, K. 2010:14).

In 1997, Lao PDR was admitted into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and subsequently joined the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA). As part of its AFTA membership, Lao PDR agreed to gradual tariff

cuts, and tariff levels were meant to have come in line with the rest of the ASEAN countries by 2008. The country also participates in other regional mechanisms, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), further linking its future with the wider region (Lao PDR Gender Profile, 2005).

Since the introduction of the NEM and the associated business liberalization program, both Lao and foreign business investments have increased rapidly, and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has played an increasingly important role in the socio-economic development of the country. FDI started to increase in the early 1990s, with the peak years in 1995 and 1996. One of the major recipients of FDI then was the manufacturing sector, especially the garment industry, as Laos exported 80% of its garment products to European Union (EU) nations. However, due to the economic crisis in the late 1990s, ASEAN investors have become the largest source of FDI in Laos, and European investments have decreased (Freeman, 2001).

## **The Lao Garment Industry**

The first Lao spinning and weaving cotton factory was established in 1984 and led to the establishment of a wave of garment factories in the early 1990s by domestic and foreign investors, and in particular after the promulgation of the Investment Promotion Act in 1988. The garment industry has since grown to be one of the most prominent in the Lao manufacturing sector. Garment factories in Lao PDR can largely be divided into foreign-owned and joint venture factories which are directly involved in the internal trade of inputs and finished products, and locally invested factories which sub-contract internal inputs in most cases. Many of the foreign affiliated garment factories have relocated from neighboring countries, in particular Thailand, and are concentrated in Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR (Souknilanh, 2010). The number of garment factories, both domestic and foreign owned, had reached more than 100 by the turn of the twenty-first century, but had fallen to around 82 by 2008. The global financial crisis was perhaps the main reason why some garment factories went out of business in Laos in 2008. However, this crisis also created a trend for textile and garment factories in the country to switch to producing high-quality products for higher-end markets. Linked to this trend, Japan, as well as Thailand, China and the EU, has emerged as a major



source of investment in the garment and footwear industries in Laos since 2007 (Souknilanh, 2010).

The Lao garment industry has played an important role in raising awareness of Lao industry in general, and is now the largest manufacturing industry in the country, employing around 30,000 workers almost all of whom are women (Souknilanh, 2010). Due to the increase in garment-exporting factories, labor has also been required, and this increase in demand for laborers has encouraged a huge number of rural workers to migrate from their homes – with the associated household chores and farming activities – to work in the city to generate a higher income.

However, socio-economic changes in Laos have impacted upon gender relations in both the rural and urban areas, as the opportunities for women to leave their families in search of work have increased, so much so that in some areas more women than men work outside the family home to help and support family members (Phouxay, K 2010: 54).

## **Development and Urban Migration**

Due to the expansion of the industrial sector, including garment factories, which requires more female than male workers, there has been a steady flow of female migrants to urban areas. In terms of women migrants and the global economy, Mills argues that female labor is attractive to international capital investment, because of the persistent assumptions of employers regarding the kind of workers women make. Employers often expect young women without a family of their own to feed to show a high level of commitment to waged employment, as they have only been in the labor market for a few months or years. Consequently, it is expected that female workers are more likely to put up with low pay, remitted benefits and long term job insecurity. Their age and gender also suggest a workforce where the majority will have already been schooled in obedience to (parental) authority, will work hard and have the patience and dexterity required for intricate tasks. As a result, women's characters and skills are often seen to be particularly well-suited to the fine detail and endless repetition of textile and electronics assembly work (Mills, 1999: 7).

## Chapter 2

# Theoretical Debate on the Feminization of Modernity

### The Feminization of Modernity

The term 'feminization' is not a new term but due to a lack of documentation on the concept of the feminization of modernity, a variety of other, similar concepts had to be relied on. The concept of 'feminization of labor' has been used to describe the 'flexibilization of labor' for both women and men, due to the changing nature of employment in which conditions once thought to be reliant upon women's 'secondary' employment have become common for both sexes (Menon-Sen et al., 2001). Standing (1989) states that the feminization of labor is an ambiguous term, signaling both the perils and the possibilities of the new economy for workers, and that one of the most dramatic transformations to have taken place in the world of work over the last generation has been the steep rise in the number of women in the paid labor force. For instance, in the industrialized sectors - based on the manufacturing of textiles, garments, electronics and other 'light' industrial goods - female participation and employment tended to rise very sharply in recent years (Standing, G, 1999).

Significantly, the concept of 'feminization of migration' was also employed which has played an important role in global economic development and has led to an increased level of participation of women in the labor market, to

highlight the coincidental changes that have taken place in both the supply of, and demand for labor. In recent decades, women's participation in waged labor work has increased throughout the world (McDowell, 1999); for instance, all EU countries have experienced a feminization of their labor force, and women's participation in the labor market has increased, while men's participation has remained stable or has even declined (Anderson, B., 2001). The number of women migrating within the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) has increased rapidly, and women are moving into occupations in the predominantly urban, industrial, trade, service and tourism sectors (Chantavanich, 2000).

The concept of the 'feminization of agriculture' was also highlighted, referring to women's increasing participation in the agricultural labor force, whether as independent producers, as unremunerated family workers, or as agricultural wage workers. As a result of this trend, women now work, not only in the fields and pastures, but also in agricultural processing and packing plants (Susana Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006: 2). Similarly, Katz (2003) and Deere (2005) provide more specific definitions of the feminization of agriculture, as follows:

1. An increased rate in women's participation in the agricultural sector, either as self-employed workers or as agricultural wage workers; in other words, an increased percentage of women who are economically active in rural areas, and
2. An increased percentage of women in the agricultural labor force relative to men, either because more women and/or fewer men are working in agriculture.

The definitions above suggest that women are increasingly taking charge of farms, as men either migrate for extended periods or engage in off-farm employment. In some regions such as Africa, men's greater access to education and the ability to leave their farm has resulted in them securing off-farm employment (Susana Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006: 3).

The concepts lead to the definition of the term 'feminization' as the action or process of becoming feminine. Thus, the 'feminization of modernity' may be described as the process of becoming a modern woman in the daily life over a period of time in the city, even if it is a change in the level of modernity that is biased against gender. Whatever the case, the study focused on the process of becoming a modern woman, as the feminization of modernity may be

distinguished as a gender-based activity at the current time. In addition, the feminization of modernity reflects the changing levels of women's participation in a number of activities. This process might include: (1) a change in women's values in the modern context and in terms of performance (altered social norm as tensions between freedom and traditional roles and obligations); (2) modernity and reflectivity (classify themselves in modern society); and (3) adaptation to, and an imagination of the process of modernity, as well as struggles within the women's own imaginations.

It is necessary to explain the concepts of modernity and imagination, mass consumption and modernity, and internal migration and female migrant workers to understand and describe in more detail the idea of modern women in the context of the lives of factory workers.

## **Modernity and Imagination**

To further consider the concept of the 'feminization of modernity,' the concept of modernity and imagination was also explored. Is it possible for modernity to occur without modernization being present? Modernization refers to technological advancement and so, on the surface, would seem to imply the kinds of parallel development seen during the Industrial Revolution in the West, especially as these technological developments generally led to economic expansion and political change (Buntrock, 1996). Modernization in this context refers to the industrialization or modernization of societies, which have a variety of characteristics such as Western forms and/or new forms of architecture and high levels of technology (such as the internet, satellite TV and mobile phones). In contrast, modernity refers to a set of related attributes that resulted from the Industrial Revolution and its social and economic ramifications. Because the Industrial Revolution was the result of technological advances, modernity and scientific and rational thought have since been valued and economic efficiencies promoted. This emphasis on rational thought and abstraction means that conscious states are considered more important than subconscious states; aesthetic or intuitive ways of thinking are considered peripheral to development (Buntrock, 1996). With the meanings of modernization and modernity outlined above, it is noticeable that the two terms have a very close relationship and are interrelated.



Giddens classifies modernity as: (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; and (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order as it involves a society more technically advanced and a complexity of institutions which, unlike any preceding culture, live in the future rather than the past (Giddens, 1998: 94).

According to Mills, modernity is a particular form of political and economic organization associated with the contemporary nation-state and industrial capitalism. In this sense, modern societies are characterized by such features as bureaucratic rationalization, standing national armies and an economy oriented toward production for commodity markets and reliant on complex technologies and industrial labor discipline (Mills, 1999:13). Moreover, Foster (1991) states that modernity represents a break between the past and the present; a distinctive way of life contrasting the achievements and forward-looking potential of modern life against the failings or disadvantages of backward-looking 'tradition.' Not surprisingly, in many societies both past and present, such ideological constructions of modernity have tended to accompany and support modernity in its more descriptive sense, that is, the expansion of nation-state political forms and capitalist economies.

In contrast, Felski (1999) puts forward the idea of home as an assured sense of place in the modern world. She argues that the meaning and status of home is usually positioned in opposition to modernity, existing outside the flux and change of an authentically modern life (Felski, 1999–2000: 26). The vocabulary of modernity is the vocabulary of 'anti-home,' as it celebrates mobility, movement, exile and boundary crossing, while a longing for home and the desire to attach oneself to a familiar space is seen by most modernity theorists as a regressive desire (Felski, 1999–2000: 23). Finally, Felski concludes that "if the experience of modernity brought with it an overwhelming sense of innovation, ephemerality and chaotic change, it simultaneously engendered multiple expressions of desire for stability and continuity. Nostalgia, understood as a mourning for an idealized past, thus emerges as a formative theme of the modern: the age of progress was also the age of yearning for an imaginary edenic condition that had been lost." (Felski, 1995: 40)



## **Chapter 3**

# **Economic Transition And Ethnic Migration Patterns**

The implementation of Lao development policies, as well as the discourse of urban development in Vientiane and the generation of garment factories that has sprung up in Vientiane since the NEM was introduced is explored here. This is essential to help understand the feminization of migration that has taken place, as influenced by both the modernization process and socio-economic change in the urban setting, as well as by the rural developments initiated by the government.

### **Development and Socio-Economic Transformation**

The NEM has made a profound and wide-ranging change in Laos, for the country is clearly moving away from an economy dominated by agriculture, and has moved rapidly towards economic liberalization, with an increased number of private businesses or small industrial sectors set up, such as manufacturing and tourism service activities. Furthermore, trade liberalization procedures and international trade collaborations have also contributed to substantial increases in exports and imports, as well as the inflow of foreign investments over the past decade (Andersson, M. et al., 2009). Moreover, the tourism sector has grown in the cities with, for example, the significant increase in the number of hotels and guesthouses, particularly in Vientiane and the

northern provinces of Luang Namtha, Huaphanh and Xiengkhougn (NSC, 2005).

The implementation and maintenance of the NEM produced a more complex economic structure where economic reforms urgently demand a new legal system to attract foreign investment (Ivarsson, 1995). In order to attract more internal and external private investors, the GoL has since created a legal environment conducive to investment when it introduced a 'Law on Foreign Investment Promotion and Management' in 1998 and revised it in 2004.

To support the country's economic growth, the government has developed an industrialization and modernization strategy focused on a number of business sectors, such as agriculture, tourism, construction materials, hydropower, manufacturing and mining. The development of foreign trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is a significant task for each of these sectors. FDI first became significant in terms of Lao PDR's socio-economic development in the early 1990s, and has since played an important role in creating economic growth due to the natural resource sector (covering hydropower and mining) which contributed 83% of FDI in 2005. For instance, FDI has injected more than US\$313 million into the gold mining sector in Laos, of which around US\$300 million was invested in Savannakhet 'Sepone Gold Mining' activity (Khouangvichit, 2010). One of the major recipients of FDI has been the manufacturing sector, with the Lao garment industry exporting more than 80% of its goods to the EU, the USA and ASEAN countries.

The introduction of FDI into Laos has been identified as important for the development of the Lao economy, particularly in helping facilitate the integration of Laos into the regional and global economy. Linked to this, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were established in the late 1990s, such as Savan-Seno SEZ in Savannakhet, the Golden Triangle SEZ in Borkeo Province, and the Boten Dane Kham SEZ in Tone Pheung district, also in Borkeo Province. This policy was introduced to encourage foreign investment and help develop the country's infrastructure, improve business management capability and increase the level of technology. However, these SEZs have also had an influence on both the labor migration process and the resettlement of the population around the country. Due to these projects being located in both rural and urban areas, resettlements linked to them have had both positive and negative impacts on local people. (Khouangvichit, 2010)

Based on the NEM and the regional and sub-regional schemes, the GoL has decided to launch a so-called “land-linked” strategy by developing a domestic road system linked to neighboring countries. The GoL has emphasized infrastructure development, particularly of the road network, as key to the country’s development. By 2005, the total length of roads in Lao PDR had increased to 33,861 km, from only 18,363 km in 1995 and 12,383 km in 1985, which was more than threefold increase in 30 years (National Statistical Centre, 2005). The development of roads and other infrastructures has supported the development of other sectors, including agriculture and commerce, as it has eased market access and improved the transportation, freight and transshipment of goods across the country. Due to the increased development of the road network linking neighboring countries and improving transportation between different parts of the country, regional and domestic development has been impacted, influencing migration patterns.

By continuing with the NEM, the GoL has concentrated on rural development and poverty reduction as core elements of national development. Laos is a country in which more than 70% of the population live in rural areas and over 50% of GDP is generated by the agricultural sector. In 1998/1999, an agricultural census reported that 84% of households were engaged in farming (ADB, 2000: 176; Rigg et al., 2004: 608-609).

With the intention to increase development and reduce poverty in remote areas, the GoL has focused on poor communities in the countryside or in upland areas. These poor communities principally consist of minority ethnic groups who subsist on forest products and shifting cultivation. The highest rates of both deforestation and poverty occur in the Northern provinces, those which now have the lowest levels of forest cover. For example, in the south, forested land accounts for 65% of the total area, while only 48% of the surface is covered by forest in the central parts, and only 21% in the northern areas (World Bank, 2006). The Chairman of the National Rural Development Committee described remote areas in Laos as: “...the communities in the countryside [can be] classified as poor areas which are isolated, remote and uncivilized, in which the ways of living of people are different from others, and in which there are high natural and political risks and where rural people are poor and backward, and unhappy when they lack food and medicines” (UNDP, 1996: 14).



Through a resettlement program, certain villages in poor districts have been moved down to the plains to improve the people's livelihoods and integrate them into the regional development plan. The program's general goal is to bring poor ethnic minority villages closer to rural towns or urban cities and communication links (NAFRI, 2004; Phouxay, 2010). Rigg's paper (2009) states that "the Lao government's rural development policy is area-based and focuses on concentrating resources and services in particular areas, bringing the people to these development centres, rather than vice versa. This strategy has been highly contentious and the generally accepted view today is that it has, in more than a few instances, undermined livelihoods, extracted upland peoples from their traditional lands, led to severe social disruption, and, in the process, created poverty."

Drawing on the GoL's development strategy, it could be concluded that the growth in economic and socio-economic development has had both positive and negative impacts on the social systems, livelihoods and cultures of many people. Among the rural ethnic minorities, this has caused internal resettlement and migration, as well as poverty. As a consequence, a large number of communities have been resettled in suburban and city areas. In light of these developments, internal migration in Laos has been caused by a variety of factors, such as the conversion of socio-economic circumstances both in rural and urban areas. Rigg (2007) and Phouxay (2001) have studied migration in Laos, emphasizing that "with the promises of labour and monetary incomes in the urban areas, young daughters and sons of growing families living on scarce resources in rural villages leave their home area in search of jobs in the urban industries and service sectors, either in the urban centres or abroad." Internal migration in Laos, especially the migration of women, has taken place from rural to urban areas, particularly to Vientiane, where there has been a growth in job opportunities and an increased dependency on monetary incomes.

## **Vientiane under Modern Development**

Vientiane is the capital and largest city of Laos, and is situated on a bend of the Mekong River which forms the border with Thailand. During the French rule, Vientiane was the administrative capital and it has become the economic center of Laos. Being the center of technology, education and commerce, it has seen economic growth in recent times. Vientiane covers an area of almost 1,500

square kilometers of permanent and seasonal floodplains, swamps and marshes, and it has a population of 692,900 people, with a density of 176 people per square kilometer (ADB, 2001).

The GoL classifies urban centers of more than 35,000 inhabitants as secondary towns, and these include Luang Prabang, Pakse, Savannakhet and Thakhek. The other provincial capitals have populations of between 5,000 and 25,000 inhabitants (Lao PDR country report, 2001).

Vientiane's favorable position has caused it to become the country's leading area in terms of the exchange of goods, services and the endorsement of new sciences and technologies from overseas (Lao Government, 2004). In recent years, its population has increased rapidly, due to migration into the city and also the rising population within Vientiane itself. The city is a mix of old and new, as it is undergoing a rapid transformation within the context of industrialization and modernization, which attracts many young laborers from outside.

Compared to other cities in the region, Vientiane is small in size and population, with low population density and low levels of industrial activity. However, the GoL has introduced it to development partners, adopting urban policies and programs designed to build the capacity of the authorities who implement its policies and programs, as well as mobilize the requisite internal and external financial resources.

Urban development and urbanization are two of the most important demographic trends of the twenty-first century, and growth has been particularly rapid in low-income countries. Much of urban growth is associated with the rapid expansion and development of small urban centers resulting in the need to carry out Vientiane's industrialization and modernization, both in the short and long-term, based on appropriate steps. This has involved modernizing state enterprises and their joint ventures. Additionally, the economic sector had to be strongly promoted in cooperation with local people, with family enterprises, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and the domestic and foreign private sectors, by improving the business climate and enabling greater synergy and competitiveness within the national economic base.

Other sectors that had to be industrialized and modernized include telecommunications, communications, trade, finance, banking and state



## Chapter 4

# Urban Lifestyles of Female Migrant Factory Workers

This chapter analyzes the urban lifestyles of the female migrant workers in the garment factory in Vientiane, based on their everyday practices in both the factory and dormitory settings.

### Daily Practices in Factory Life

The socio-economic transformation that has taken place during the liberalization era has led to a change in people's preconceptions. Modernization and industrialization have been at the core in terms of altering people's everyday lives, both in the public and private spheres. Many people, and particularly women in Lao society, have migrated to look for employment in the cities, where there are more job opportunities. Thus, many female migrants have found themselves working in factories, as part of a capitalist form of industrial production. These workers can be differentiated in terms of their backgrounds, homes and ethnicities. Although most of them come from different areas and also from different ethnic groups, they are similar in that they are poor and come from subsistence agriculture backgrounds in rural areas.

Because almost all of the workers come from farming families and are used to work only on the farm before moving to Vientiane, they had never used a sewing machine before, so working in a garment factory proved to be a challenge for the young women. They had to learn, not only new skills with

the sewing machine, but also how to manage themselves in terms of the factory timetable and working under supervision. Mai has only been working at the factory a short time. She has little education, having quit school after primary level. As a result, she can only speak a little Lao and has no experience in factory work before she moved.

Everyday, I arrive at the factory and start work at 8 a.m. I sew buttons, as I learned this as a new skill. I can earn money through the production of pieces, but because I work long hours and get very little money I try to speed-up, to produce more, and sometimes I work overtime.

Ning has been working at the factory for only two years and she describes her duties when she first arrived:

My first duty was on the sewing section, but I could not even do basic sewing. The head of the workers put me on the preparation of pieces for the sewers. Doing this, I have to stand and walk around, which makes me so tired and bored. This job is for newcomers who are unskilled. It also pays a very low salary.

Every day, Ning works very hard but she has little money and she needs to work on other tasks, as well as sewing. Luckily, the supervisor offered her a new job which she likes after having worked there one and half years. "So now I have changed to sewing. I can earn a lot of money and do not have to walk around, as I did before." Sewing is considered skilled work, so workers there can earn more money. This work is paid per piece, so those who sew a lot can earn more money.

Due to company policy, duties such as preparing pieces for the sewers, sewing buttons, ironing and cutting loose thread, are considered unskilled jobs and are given to newcomers who are less skilled. All the newcomers do not want to do these jobs, but have to, due to the limited choice. The workers who are more educated or more experienced in factory work are able to do work they like. Some even have the chance of being promoted as head of line or a

line leader who is responsible for the newcomers, or the head of a sewing section or clothes accountant. Vin is a skilled worker and moved to work in the factory after she finished high school. She has worked at the factory for more than ten years where she started as a clothes accountant, although she had never studied accounting prior to that. The manager stated that newcomers who have finished high school can be taught easily and gain a high position. Vin earns more than the other workers - 1,560,000 Kip per month. She said, "I can say I like my job a lot, it is not too hard for me. Every day, I receive the customers' orders from the managers and then calculate how long before the clothes can be delivered to them."

However, Vin still complained about the work hours as she works all day, six days a week. On some days she has to do overtime, but gets no extra money. Doing overtime makes Vin feel like she is working for free. "When others do overtime, they get extra money, but for me, even if I do overtime until 8 p.m. or 9 p.m., I don't get anything. I feel that my work is not too hard, but I have to work very long hours."

Working under capitalist discipline, all the workers have factory time restrictions and schedules that they have to pay close attention to and follow every day. The working day starts at 8 a.m. and ends at midday, when all the workers break for lunch for an hour, before starting again at 1 p.m. and work until 5 p.m. For the workers who do overtime, they recommence at 5 p.m. and work until 7, 8 or 9 p.m., depending on the task. Working overtime is required as some tasks require merged targets and deadlines.

Also, while working in the factory, the workers are not allowed to talk to each other or talk on the phone. Before starting work, all the workers have to put their personal belongings, such as purses, keys, cell phones and other property in a box, which the factory provides for each of them in a separate room. The workers do not have time to rest during work. Upon recruitment, the factory manager assigns newcomers in positions where they require little supervision, before deciding what longer term task they will do. The manager does not assign them based on their ethnicity or the dormitory they live in. This means that those of the same ethnicity are separated based on their duties, otherwise they will talk or share ideas whenever they have time.

The daily practices of these workers in the factory are very different from those at home. The female workers had very similar answers about their life;

that they are tired working at the factory, tired of the rules and the time restrictions, as well as working under capitalist discipline. In some cases, the workers work overtime well into the night. They work six days a week, meaning they have only one day off on Sunday. They see factory work as very difficult that involves a lot of pressure.

In the focus groups discussions and interviews (December, 2011), the female workers expressed these points:

Everyday, we work very hard but get a low wage when compared to our daily duties. It is more diverse than our work in the paddy fields at home, but at home we worked for ourselves and helped our parents in the field, it was independent - no one controlled us or imposed capitalist discipline. We could take a break at home whenever we needed, but it is the opposite at the factory. However, because we need the money, we have to work away from home, due to our desire to be modern women. There was no pressure working in the paddy field, but there also was no money, and we worked under the sun all day. So because having money is related to modernity, we have to work in the factory.

Factory work is multifarious and offers only one day off a week. The workers sit in chairs and move their bodies in line with the work process all day (Ong, 1991). Poorly educated and inexperienced, they are exploited and face serious hardships, work long hours and get little money. However, money is their focus, so they work in the factory to fulfill their and their siblings' desires.

## **Earning Income in the Factory**

Cash income is a significant and critical concern for every person involved in globalization. People seek cash or money through a variety of economic activities, whether these are agricultural, industrial, trade or wage labor.

Three decades ago in Laos, people led a traditional life, traveled by foot, by bicycle and also communicated by letter, and had a subsistence existence practicing a natural form of agriculture. Nowadays, life is much more convenient



and everything is high-tech, but also costs money. Money has more power today and people cannot live without it. However, in rural and remote areas where it is hard to earn money, the unemployed, particularly women, often migrate to where there are more jobs available, such as in the industrial sector and in factories, and in particular in garment factories which provide work for unskilled women. For women with little education in Laos, they see factory work as an initial way to generate income, and such work can improve their lives in a modern environment.

The factory pays employees based on their daily duties and overtime, on their educational level and work experience. Due to their limited education and lack of skills, the workers get very low salary, compared to their tasks and to other work. The wages they earn per month range from 500,000 Kip (US\$60) to 800,000 Kip (US\$100), plus 100,000 kip (US\$13) per month that the factory gives to cover food and drink. The workers who work overtime can earn around 1,250,000 Kip (US\$150) per month. For workers who have more than ten years experience, plus who do overtime, they can earn a higher income. Also, some work outside the factory, to earn more money, but this depends on their skills.

According to the Lao government policy on wages for employees, the monthly minimum wage, plus social welfare, based on working full-time eight hours a day and five days a week, is 569,000 kip (US\$75). The workers also receive health insurance in the case of medical costs, hospital expenses and in case of accidents (Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2009). Thus, the wages received at the factory are low, because they work six days a week but get only a basic salary, plus social welfare, of 500,000 Kip.

### **Daily Life in the Dormitory**

The dormitory is one of the facilities attracting young women to migrate from the countryside to work in the factory, as it is provided to all workers, so they do not have to worry about finding a place to stay while working in the city. The factory dormitory has many sub-buildings with small rooms. At least ten workers stay together in one room, which the company provides only with beds. There are no beddings or cupboards, so the workers have to buy these themselves. Other facilities provided include a common kitchen and a big communal area for eating, which has a television, toilets and bathrooms. The



## Chapter 5

# Factory Girls And Modern Practices

The young female factory workers developed their perception of modernity as well as their modern practices in an urban setting, but they also experience the dilemmas when struggling to be modern, and differ in how they are able to overcome their imaginations.

### **From Rural Experience to Perceptions of Modernity: Author's Perspective**

When discussing the lives of the migrant workers and modernity, the author draws up her own history, being one among thousands of migrant workers working for the government in Vientiane, which can be considered a modern city by Lao standards. Born in a small village in rural Sayabouly district, Sayabouly Province, the author is the eighth child in a traditional big Lao family of five sisters and four brothers. Her family's survival depended on their natural environment and could be classified as poor at that time.

Between the age of ten and until she finished high school at seventeen, she had to work on the farm on vacation and on weekends. She was able to complete high school, supported by her oldest sister who worked as a policewoman and by another older sister who migrated to Vientiane to work in a garment factory in 1993. She considers the two older sisters as her second parents.

In high school, her parents and sisters told her: “You might be able to study only up to high school level, because we have no money to support you if you continue your studies at the university.” She was very sad and surprised, as she had always expected to continue on to university in Vientiane; wanted to see the city and live there. She had always dreamed of visiting Vientiane someday, and wanted to live among modern comforts such as good roads, electricity, main water, and most importantly, study at a higher educational institution. Thus, the term ‘modern’ meant living with facilities in an urban setting and getting a higher education and acquiring more skills.

To the author, modern people are those who attain higher education and live in a modern environment and at that time she had a strong desire to live in a modern place such as Vientiane. She however, had limited funds to study in Vientiane, so she studied hard to get a government scholarship which she was able to secure and thus was able to go to Vientiane to study at a university there.

Once there, she saw a modern city, as related on the radio, where life was more comfortable and educational institutions, health care centers and job opportunities were accessible. After graduation, she did not go back to her hometown, but worked as a government teacher at the university where she had studied. Then, her life gradually changed when she got married after two years and had a daughter. Though her status changed from being single to being married and a mother, the idea of modernity remained as she had previously thought. She then took a master’s degree at Chiang Mai University, expecting to be able to support her daughter in her studies in the future.

Based on her story, her perception of modernity is linked to phrases such as ‘high technology living environment’ and ‘greater levels of knowledge,’ similar to what Appadurai refers to when describing the dimensions of global cultural flows as technoscapes and ideoscapes. Thus, in the conduct of her study in the garment factory, the author was interested to explore the process of being modern among the female migrant workers, as well as their imaginations and perception of modernity.

### **The Young Factory Workers’ Perceptions of Modernity**

The transformation that the workers have gone through was highlighted when their background from being rural to becoming urban was reviewed,

based on their daily life experiences in the dormitory and factory. Almost all the young workers came from remote areas, had little education and lacked urban life experience, and several of them moved to Vientiane with a strong desire to become modern women. With their new-found urban experiences, these young women now imagine themselves as modern women. When asked what they thought being modern means, most of them said being independent of home, having access to modern facilities, wearing fashionable clothes and using beauty products. Others replied that being modern means having more money and being able to save for the future. Some workers who had finished high school said that modern women should also have a higher level of education; while those with more work experience aged over 30 and who have worked for more than six years in the factory said, that to be modern is to remain unmarried.

The perception of being modern among poorly educated people such as factory workers seems to have many characteristics. Being modern can be linked to the term freedom, living far from home in the city without restrictions, free from family norms and having no parental control. As Felski states, the term modernity is the idea of 'anti-home;' home is usually in opposition to modernity, existing outside and change of an authentically modern life (Felski, 1999-2000:23-26). Living outside, the factory girls can go anywhere they want and do anything they want without having to ask for permission. They can act as they like, and no one complains about what they do such as socializing with people and accessing entertainment services. Although they face rules and regulations living in the dormitory, for example, returning before the dormitory gate closes at 10 p.m., they can leave the dormitory rules behind by renting a room, where there are no such controls.

Another perception of being modern among the factory workers relates to access to urban conveniences, in particular the difference between urban Vientiane and their home villages. The migrant workers described Vientiane as modern compared to their hometown, as it is the country's center of socio-economic development, has more industry and more employment. In Vientiane, young women can work indoors and get paid, unlike in the rural areas where they have to work under the sun. "Back home, we worked under the sun for no money and, more than that, our skin became dark. In Vientiane we work in the shade with air conditioning, and every month we receive a salary." (Group discussion, January 2012)



Additionally, Vientiane has plenty of amenities such as electricity and water. In the dormitory, the workers can use tap water and easily cook. The city has good transportation facilities such as good roads, bus and taxi services too. The workers can simply go out, as they said, “it is so different in Vientiane, compared to our villages. At home there are a lot of rough and dusty roads, and in the wet season there are many swamps and the roads are barely passable, so we have to walk.” (Group discussion, January 2012)

Also, Vientiane has a lot of parks, tourist sites, trade centers and entertainment services. Most of the workers said that they can go shopping and visit bars and karaoke venues, go relaxing in the evening or on days-off. They visit That Luang monument, Anousavaly or Pratuxay parks, and walk along the banks of the Mekong River.

Their perceptions of being modern are translated into modern consumption patterns, such as using aesthetics (cosmetics), the electronic media and buying new, fashionable clothes. They acknowledge that Vientiane is a center of fashion in Laos, and being factory workers, they can earn money and be financially independent, and become urban consumers. Living in a city, the young workers identify with items such as fashionable clothes, stylish jewelry, make-up and mobile phones, among others.

Their perception of modernity is linked with higher education or higher levels of knowledge, as one young worker said that a modern person is someone who has intellect and skills. A modern society, with technology and good work positions, requires people with more skills to manage it. The workers in Vientiane have a high expectation to enter school, whereas poor girls such as the factory workers have to work hard to gain access to college. Moreover, working in a factory puts time restrictions on them, but they work hard and save for their future studies. The workers have asked for permission from the garment manager to let them study in the evening for those without overtime shifts. An example is Phet, a 19 year-old Lao Loum worker who migrated when she finished high school, and got a factory work due to lack of money. Working under a capitalist system, she has been exploited and finds the work difficult, so she hopes to change her job by gaining a higher education in the future. She said:

Once, I visited my family and I also went to my friends’ party where my friends talked about school and grades. I kept quiet, thinking that school and grades are a part of being modern.



# The Feminization of Modernity

## A Case Study of Women Migrant Workers in a Lao Garment Factory

Latdavone Khamphouvong

In 1986, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) put into effect its 'New Economic Mechanism' (NEM) in its bid for modernization and development. With this national policy came the conversion of a predominantly agricultural and subsistence-based economy into one focused on commodity-driven production. The country's integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its signing of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) made official its integration into the regional and international economy. The once state-planned, socialist economy was restructured into an open, liberalized one. One sector that has experienced marked growth is manufacturing, specifically the garment industry. Domestic and foreign-owned garment factories established beginning in the early 1990s now have Laos exporting 80% of its garment products to European Union (EU) nations.

Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR, has become a magnet for young rural women in search of job opportunities, a place vastly different from their impoverished rural villages. They are now part of a labor force of around 30,000 mostly unskilled and lowly paid female workers in garment factories. From rural workers to urban factory workers, the women—who are mostly ethnic minorities—face changes and challenges as they leave behind traditional roles and relationships and build their lives around perceptions of modernity, independence and consumerism. There are social and economic costs: adjustments to a new work ethic and urban lifestyle, low income and high expenditures, and obligatory remittances to families back in remote villages. Attitudes, appearances and values have been transformed to fit into the concept of modernity that urban living and working has brought to these women.

Critical  
Perspectives  
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L a o s  
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