

The Role of Women Weavers in Economic Liberalization: A Study of Women in Weaving Factory in Lao PDR

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The economic is important to Lao people, particularly after the Lao PDR opened country to outsider in 1986 and the changing economic from a state economy to market-oriented economy (Economic liberalization). A result from adoption economic liberalization many rural people mobility to find out jobs in city, especially women. These women leave their own village to the city, and pay attention on the work in the factory. This paper focused upon the status of these women, and specific on women weavers in a weaving industry in Vientiane, Lao PDR. The methodology using was explanatory and this paper found that weaving factory women faced serious difficulty and a result of their role as “weaving factory women”.

Keywords: women role, weaving factory women, factory

Nowadays, in Lao PDR, hand-weaving industry is a significant part of social and economic activity, these economic activities was mostly occupied by women. Being participant observation in weaving factory N, I was conclude by animated scenes women’s engagement in weaving factory which looks like a ‘world of women’, almost all workers are women. These women left the role of receiver to become producers and income earners. Also the census on of factory workers in 2007 showed that 95 % of the weaving business workers are women (Lao National Statistic Center 2007).

Even though, the result of economic liberalization and the rapid of young women into formal employment in weaving factory brought many benefits to women weavers and their families. It is caused difficulty for women weavers in the workplace, at societal-levels. This paper looks at the status of women weavers in a weaving factory. This paper hypothesis that it is possible for Lao weaving factory women to enhance their status either improved their living condition in society by their earning income.

In my research, I conclusions that weaving factory women had low status and bad people in society, due to the unreasonable from people in society contempt that factory women are bad and it is also related to economic restrictions and social class. This paper presents findings from the research conducted rather than any conceptual or analytical framework.

Methods and a Brief Profile of the Workers

This paper is based on observation and in-depth interviews with weaving factory women who work in weaving factory N, the owner of the factory, some small shop owner nearby factory and the men who walk around factory. All of the interviews for the study were guided by an open-ended questionnaire. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded, and interview tapes were later transcribed.

Thirty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with women weavers, defined as those currently employed in weaving factory. I used several techniques for collecting data. I began by visiting factory, during these visits I identified women weavers willing to participate in the study. I then visited these workers by sat on their loom to observe and conducted interviews with them. After that I go to shopping, and dinner with them. Beside weavers, two in-depth

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interviewed were factory owner, and owner of the small shop nearby factory and the last people I discuss with is men who looking for women from the factory.

The majorities of the workers in the sample were between the ages of 16 to 43 (see table 1), 32 women weavers, 1 owner of factory, 1 is the owner of small shop and three men. 26 are never-married, 7 are currently married (include factory owner and shop owner), 1 divorced and three men did not know about their status. As far as education; 4 attend primary school grade three and four, 3 attend secondary school grade two and three, 4 finished secondary school, 12 currently study at university, two technical, include owner, eight did not mention and three did not know.

For women workers, almost of them are weavers, and some officers, motifs designer and spinners, and these women come from different places of rural areas and had been involved in weaving factory in different periods range from one to more than ten years as shown by table 2. I categorized the simply population into three groups; first women doing weaving as main job, second defined as those currently students and weaving to get extra income and the last are factory owner, shop owner and men who walk around factory.

Results and Discussions

The Role of Women Weavers in Economic Liberalization

Women role in economic liberalization is generally associated with formal employment among young women and increased economic. Neo-liberalists commonly assume that jobs will be created convenient and pragmatic for women as they can often be negotiate around a women's domestic role, while many feminist scholars argue that the double burden on women regarding societal desire for fertility and the productive demand for them to supply their labor. Mills (1999) modern consumption increase the burden of subsistence work on women. Tivers (1977) the gender role constraint is one that underlies all other influences on women activity patterns (cited in Jenkins, 2006; 8), and the change of perception among women themselves was followed by a large involvement of women in paid work and cash income economic activities (Damdouane, 2010; 182). Most arguments above are valid; however depend on my research and the data collections.

In Lao PDR, in the past, women and men have different role and position. Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black (2004) present "women and men's characteristics and activities as complementary, each a necessary and valued part of the larger whole, although men's activities may be valued somewhat more highly than women's activities (2004; 17-18). After adopt economic liberalization in 1986, Lao government declares gender equality, draw on women into economic production outside the home, and acknowledge the important of women dual role in production and family.

The economic liberalization provides women a new opportunity to change the scale, design and style of their weaving production; they started to follow western styles in the design of their traditional clothes. They produce clothes for scale to the international market. Through this process female earn improved income, gain access to various assets and household appliances, and accumulate capital for further investment. In addition to this, Lao women gain new experience not only in weaving but also in managerial skills. Some weavers have become entrepreneur's housewives, hiring other women to work in their weaving activities. In the early years, they relied on their relatives to produce the product and several

of these enterprises have kept that family model as the businesses developed capital (Lundberg, 2008: 264).

Weaving in the modern period, women have to weave either outside or in a factory, women describe weaving as their job and they weave for income. So, women have been liberated to work harder, their work burdens continued to be heavy under economic liberalization.

The situation of weaving factory women was normal that they worked with rules and regulations of the factory (working under control of manager, time restriction and etc). They worked by the normal schedule from 8 am to 17 pm and have one hour and a half break for lunch. However, in weaving factory there are many units and many steps of work, every step or units workers responsible different kinds of work and spend different time to work on. Most of workers work in weaving factory work 8 hours a day and get salary for a month, except workers who responsible in weaving unit. In weaving factory, there are more than half of the workers responsible in weaving; most of them get wage base on their ability of how much they can produce productions. Meant that if they can produce more they could get more, therefore these women usually work before 8 AM and continue to work in the night time and some time, they also work on Sunday. Some of these issues were revealed in the narratives of weaving factory women listed below:

“The factory schedule, work start at 8 am to 5 pm, but we (weavers) continue to weave until 11: 30 pm, and some time we get up early and weave before 8 am. On Sunday, if no special even (festivals, ceremonies), we also weave” (Discus group, November 20, 2010)

“I work here for around five years. I am a student at university of Lao, I study in the morning. Every day I get up at 5:30, after get up I weave until 6:30. Next take a bath, dresses, make up, and has black fast at 7:00. Then I go to school at 7:30 [the school schedule start at 8:00 to 12:00]. After study I back to factory immediately for lunch. After that I weave until 20:00 or 20:30. Then I take shower and doing homework. Finally, I go to bed at around 23:00” (in-depth interviewed, 23 years-old, women weavers, November 22, 2010).

“Every day, I get up at five or six; first I watch my face and take shower around 5-10 minutes, we [weavers] cannot take shower long time because there is a bath room and two toilets for us. After that I usually wave until 7:00 have breakfast. After breakfast I continue to weave. I went to bed around 23:00. On the weekend, I also weaves because I did not have relative here” (in Vientiane) to visit (in-depth interviewed, 18 years-old women weavers, December 09, 2010)

Even though, the majority of the large factories operate 8 hours a day and from Monday to Sunday, the workers who worked in weaving unit had to work harder than others units, they work such a long day around 12 to 13 hours a day, and 6 to 7 days per week plus work [overtime] in the night time on the hand loom put on cement plat without air-condition while others work 8 hours a day, and 6 days for a week. Beside that women weavers had to do others kind of work in the process of weaving (see picture) and narrative citation below;

“I am working here around 11 or 12 years, every day getup at 6 o'clock; first take shower and black fast. I work from 8 am to 21 or 22 pm with break one hour and

a half for lunch and dinner. My position is weaving, but after I finish the whole line of weaving, I had to make long line (Khon Hook); tie silk (Seok Hook), make motifs, and some time spinning, all of that work I did not get money. I get money only for a piece of production, that I can produce (in-depth interviewed, 41 years, women weaver November 19, 2010).

The citation above telling the multiple works of women weavers, they work no day off and weekend. After coming work in weaving factory, women weavers have very little free time; women weavers sat on the hand loom all day, and their body had mobilized with the process of work (Ong 1991); such as their eyes fits with motifs, hand make motifs, thread silk, and weave and the foot also put on wood to make hole. At the same time women weavers face other issue of labor exploitation among their work such as the place of work, the space of living, the toilet and etc. For instance, women weavers weave on the handloom put on cement floor in the open air house with hot weather, but no cold water to drink.

Most of these women weavers stayed in the factory dormitory; the factory owners provided some facility as bedroom, food, water and etc. Their bed room on second floor of working place, worker sleep together with three to six or more people with their own table fan and no bed, they just put their own cot on the wooden floor and sleep on, the next day after getup they have gave it to make personal space. The most important factor was that they were controlled by the factory owners and followed the rules of the factory, such as every day they have to work minimum 8 hours. During this period, they had to produce fabric to owner as much as they can.

Beside bed room, the toilet also limit, most of workers claim “every day they have to use toilet or take shower so quickly”. In factory N, there are 73 people, 12 are men and 61 women, and the factory had two bathroom, one for women, and other for men. For this thing normally the owner of the factory are also women, they will know well, women usually used toilet or bathroom more time than men, and also in this factory, there are more women than men. Although, the owners of factory are women, they did not care about this. They care only benefits, not workers lives. They feel that if they provide more bathrooms or toilet workers will spend more time there, they will lose their work. Thus, working in the factory as a “life in the prison” (Scott cited in Ong 1991) an example, when I discuss with a factory owner, I asked her about meal that she offer to workers, she told that;

“If I did not provide them meals, they will go outside to eat. They will chat with their friends or maybe wait for food, and come back to work late. My work will not finish on time and finally I will lose customers” (factory owner, interviewed 23/05/2010).

According to the information above women factory weavers do face serious hardship; working long hours, and exploited in the process of weaving. However, women factory weavers claim that, it is their duty, and it is better than working in the rice field. For example;

“I came there with amount of money 11.500 LKP (around US\$ 1.4), without friend and has a few clothes and my cloth so old and normal clothe. I did not have a mobile phone, but now I get more modern clothes, a mobile phone. At the same time I can save money for myself and for my family” (in-depth interviewed, 18 years-old women weavers, December 09, 2010).

“Before working there, she stays with her uncle and woven with her aunt, without wage, but working here is freedom, gets income, after school only weaves. Only factory N gave her opportunity so she has to pay attention. Weaving is not difficult work, and it is not easy, first is very difficult, but if love, patience, active, everybody can get this experience and did not forgot it forever. For the future, after finish high school will continue to study at the University or colleges and weaving here (in-depth interviewed, 20 years-old women weavers, December 10, 2010P).

Almost of women weavers said “it is their work”. They regard “weaving as a job”. In the traditional subsistence economy of Laos, weaving procured additional necessities such as medicine or extra food. In the emerging market economy in Laos in which living well requires currency, weaving is a primary means of livelihood and it is the means to acquire the basics. Also it is better than working in the rice field, in the rice field they work with sunlight all day, and did not get money, working in the weaving factory without sun and get money.

Factory Women and Their Status in Society

Social historians of women have long-known that any understanding of women’s labor outside the home is impossible without knowledge of their complex roles within. In the past, women were responsible for domestic work; including weaving. Those works did not get paid so women had a lower rank and less power than men (Eriksen 2001: 126-133). Now within economic liberalization, even though women can make money, in the eyes of society, feel that factory women are bad people.

In the past, there are some factory women acts and show unsatisfactory behaviors in society; for instance as some factory women become Maenoi and some provide sexual to make extra income after work. For example, factory women only need to show their characters involve within factory, but the major position of these women is “women sex-worker” or “Maenoi” (Oloth; 2007). In addition, women came from remote areas, people in the city usually look down and exclude people from rural areas by unreasonable.

Even though, in the weaving factory, according to data from factory owner, workers and some people around there, women weavers is not provide sexual and no one become to Maenoi. People in the city had though, who came from rural are “poor and bad”, especially women, and working in the factory. An example of these even showed by list as the narrative below;

“I am working here more than ten years; I did not saw the relationship between “Pormae” (man who get married) and worker here. Maybe some worker will fall in love with “Pormae”, but did not know because I am so old. (43 years-old, a woman weaver, interviewed 02/04/2011).

“I was born here, and I growth here until now. I never saw arguments between women from outside and in the factory, and I did not hear about WFW become as Maenoi. However, this is not means that they are good people, maybe if some men offer them good benefits than they make, they will agree with” (owner of the small shop nearby factory, interviewed 30/03/2011).

Besides that I had discuss with four men who walking around factory and looking some women from the factory about women weavers, when sat around the table and have some food at a small shop nearly weaving factory as they says;

“Factory women as factory women” (a man, age around 39 or 40 years says)

“Weaving factory women as garment women, these women did not care about their body. They need only money, if some men provide them good financial they will agree with” (a man age around 34 or 35 says)

“Why you say like that, they are also human” (a man, age around 38 or 39 years).

“Do not be gentleman, I know you also though like us” (age around 39 or 40 replied)

The citation telling that women weaver is bad people not only they are acts and show unsatisfactory, but also people in the city care about classes. People in the city feel, people from rural are lower class whereas people in the city high class. Even though city people lack of economic, and the education is not different from rural people, they show off “they are rich and diligence”. Because of these, in the eyes of society women weavers are bad and poor. Besides urban people, people in the village also criticize them as Nock told that;

“when I am in the village, my friends (Dam) who working in the factory, usually sent money home, and on the visit home in the village she wearing beautiful clothes and had money, people in my village said that dam sale her beauty by sexual service or ...” (November 25, 2010).

Nock, claim that dam is a beautiful person with diligence, and kindness person. However, within criticize of villagers Nock also though. Now Nock situation is similar to Dam, although, Nock did not sent money home, but Nock did not asked money from her parents, so the eyes of villagers will see Nock similar to Dam. Even though, Nock said that “she did not care, she did not practice bad thing”. She know herself and her family also belief her mind.” Otherwise, Nock care only “her own financial in the future, how can she make more money”.

However, in weaving factory N, there were many kinds of women; some were students, and other weavers. For the students, their situation in society was different from weavers, the students in the eyes of society is good people, because many people feel that the name of student can show their high class people. Although, their work same as weavers work, many people proud of them while they study, they could earn money. Therefore in weaving factory, weavers also see themselves as lowest people as when I talk about students, weavers feel uncomfortable to talk, their eyes showed that student workers were high class than weavers. All in all, almost of workers in weaving factory maintained they are weaving factory women and come from remote areas, their status was low and bad people.

Conclusions

It to be expected that the rapid of young women into formal employment in weaving factory was improved their living condition in society, but is not enhance their status their role ends up with “weaving factory women”.

The main focus of this paper was looks at women weavers' status in weaving factory and their role in society. The literature reviewed that has cited in this paper has portrayed young Lao women who work in weaving factory as victims of the 'industrial system', or low status by societal force. The study found that working in weaving factory is double burden work, difficult, repetitive, boring, and etc. This paper also found that many young Lao women persevere in the face of adversity is a form of resistance given the societal scorn they commonly experience. From this I concluded that the participants in my research were leading complex lives in which processes of low status by significant societal contempt.

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Appendices

Table 1

Age, Marital Status, Education Levels

Age		Marital Status		Education attend	
Lower than 20	08	Never-married	26	Primary school	4
20-29	12	Currently married	07	Lower Secondary	3
30-39	08	Divorced	01	Upper Secondary	4
More than 40	06	Don't know	03	Currently University	12
Don't know	03			Technical	2
				Don't know	12
Total	37	Total	37	Total	37

Table 2

Province from, Years of Work in Weaving Factory and Kinds of Job

Province From	Years of Work in factory		Kinds of job		
Hauphanh	18	Less than 2 years	4	Main job	20
Vientiane province	04	2-4 years	11		
Xiengkheuang	04	5-9 years	12	Supplement job	12
Laungprabang	06	More than 10 years	5		
Vientiane	01				
Total	32	Total	32	Total	32