

# 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

## 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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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.

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## 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).



Moreover, half of the total industrial workers are female and they get lower wages than men, are subjected to low wages, long hours, frequent overtime and little or no prospects for advancement. While men are almost always technicians, supervisors and labor contractors, almost all shop floor operators and home workers are young women (Ong, 1991: 287). Within Laos, capitalist discipline in recent years has tried to encourage the development of an industrial sector, focused on the supply of export products and a demand for unskilled laborers. As a result, the growth of this sector has led to an increase in the migration of people especially women.

However, not only have the labor needs of industries based in the country driven migration, but landlessness and a scarcity of resources in rural areas as well, have encouraged young people to migrate from their places of origin to work in urban areas. This situation may have resulted in some respect, from certain aspects of government policy.

NEM policies have been translated into the development of a market-oriented economy, and rural development has been one of the key national priorities of the government within this framework. At the Fourth Party Congress, the eradication of shifting cultivation and reduction of slash-and-burn forest agriculture was officially highlighted as a key policy by the government (Rigg, 2005). In order to implement this, the Lao government has introduced a policy of moving highlanders to the lowlands, to reduce poverty in the remote areas with the assumption that slash-and-burn activities lead to poverty. However, this policy has not produced positive results, as it has often led to greater poverty among local communities.

In Yos's work (2010) 'Reviewing Development from Northern Thailand to the Mekong Region,' he states that development by the government in terms of organizing space has had a negative effect on local economic conditions, particularly in upland areas. The role and effects of resettlement policies in the uplands of Laos have led to "sidewalk communities" developing alongside many roads in the northern parts of Laos. These policies have obstructed local peoples' access to the fields that they used to work in for their survival. A transition has been taking place in these upland villages towards the adoption of permanent farming systems coupled with limited land-use access, and this has resulted in an increased pressure on land and created struggles over land use (Yos et al, 2010).

Similarly, Rigg's work in northern Laos reflects on the effects of government policies on upland minorities, and he states that "...minorities become implicitly re-drawn as 'victims' of state policies and are left largely devoid of agency, autonomy or power. The reality is rather different. Minorities often leave their homes, abandon their lands, and rebuild their lives voluntarily – if not always willingly. Purpose is allayed with energy, direction with initiative, and intent with resolution. In this way there occurs a process of re-territorialization from below, an unscripted and energizing transition that takes the resettled and displaced and transforms them, once more, into villagers, albeit 'new' villagers" (Rigg, 2005: 110-111, Rigg, 2009: 22).

This policy of resettlement has led to landlessness, low incomes and poor performance levels in the agricultural sector in rural Laos, and has subsequently led to the migration of people from rural to urban areas. This mobility of peoples has been further reinforced by the attractiveness of urban employment opportunities, something that has encouraged people, especially women and young people, to resettle in the city. Phouxay highlights the changing socio-economic conditions in rural and urban areas, related especially to non-farmer families moving to find jobs in the city to support their children's education, and similarly young people moving for employment and higher education opportunities (Phouxay, K, 2001).

Recently, the number of rural people, especially women, migrating to urban centers in search of work has escalated rapidly. These women are moving mainly to Vientiane, as there has been an increase in the demand for female workers in the manufacturing, construction and service industries there. As a result, a large proportion of the migrant workers in Vientiane are women.

It can be concluded that socio-economic change in rural and urban Lao societies, combined with Laos' policy on rural development, has put pressure on the need for urbanization and modernity, and is one of the key contributory factors to population mobility. Migration from rural to urban areas is mainly driven by people dreaming of finding better jobs and in most cases, by economic pressure to support their families in rural areas. However, another factor that has been pulling people towards urban areas has been the desire to attain a certain sense of modernity and independence in their lifestyle, or as Mills has said "thansamay or thansamay consumption" (modern people or modern consumption). She also indicates that in many parts of the world, moving from

rural areas to cities is seen by young people as an opportunity to earn an income, and also often regarded as an initiation into adulthood and Western culture, and/or a possibility to become a 'modern woman' through economic independence and access to urban consumer products (Mills, 1997: 37-61).

### *The Women Migrants*

In the rush for modernity and to compete with the development of neighboring countries, the Lao government's policy has been focused on both rural and urban development often leading to migration. The rapidly expanding garment industry in urban areas, especially in Vientiane, has created a flow of workers migrating from rural areas in search of job opportunities, and female migrants who have no job opportunities, have no agricultural land or are landless and have a poor education, are the main constituents of this flow. When these women move from the rural to urban setting, they often face many difficulties adjusting to city life, and challenges to their survival as well. Often when they first arrive in the city, they are emotional and less logical than usual, and maybe cannot differentiate between right and wrong, meaning they may act in a reckless and hasty manner.

These migrant workers are often from different places and different ethnic groups, as Laos is an ethnically diverse country with 49 ethnic groups as classified by the Lao government at a conference in August 2000. These different ethnicities with different cultural backgrounds have to adjust to each other, as they often live and work in the same place. As a result, conflicts with ethnic dimensions can arise. Furthermore, these migrants are forced to adjust to a new society, a new culture and a new location in terms of modernization.

Almost all of the female garment workers in Laos are young, unmarried, with little or no education, of rural origin and from poor families. Also, most of them have had no prior waged labor experience. According to a study by Mills (1999) in Thailand, poorly educated and inexperienced migrant workers are ill-equipped to deal with and challenge employers and other authorities. Low wages, unhealthy working conditions, inadequate legal protection, arbitrary and unfamiliar forms of labor discipline, constitute a baseline of exploitation to which rural to urban migrants have little choice but to submit (Mills, 1999:10). However, some characteristics of these female workers have changed over time. As these groups struggle to change their way of life, along

with the pressure to support their families, they also consume and desire a sense of modernity.

### *Migrants and Modernity*

In terms of modernity, their mobility, changing cultural attitudes and changing way of life have allowed them some level of freedom from family norms. Modern people are those who seek freedom and changes in their lifestyles, so that they can adapt to new environments in a modern society for their survival. For instance, migrant workers want to be free from their families, thus they have to work hard to earn sufficient income to support their own desires. Phouxay states that some female workers in Laos want to escape their farm where they work “under the sunshine,” and work instead “under electricity” in industrial factories, while striving for more independence in the city (Phouxay, K., 2010: 49).

These women wish to earn income in the city not only to sustain their obligations to their families, but also to fulfill their own needs and desires to adapt to their new location. Mills points out in her study on Thailand, that “... money was what drew most migrant[s] into the city, money as the means of fulfilling not only obligations to [their] family but also their own desires for excitement at the center of a thansamay Thai society. Thousands of young women working in Bangkok desire to be both a good daughter and thansamay woman” (Mills, 1999: 125).

Based on my observations, the majority of female migrant workers in Vientiane have low income, attain low status and are exploited by the capitalist system. Even with their low wages, these workers strive to have leisure time outside of their main job, and many seek jobs on the side. Some garment workers leave the factories at the end of the day and take up other work to earn more money, such as providing sexual services in bars, while others have become the mistresses of married men who support them in terms of money and room rent. On the other hand, some of the garment workers have sought to improve their future by using their spare time to study at beauty salons or study sewing. Others work as traders, selling traditional Lao clothes such as Lao skirts.

Migrant workers look for other jobs and/or a way to improve their future lives, as they have a strong desire to meet their expectations as modern women, and hope to have a happy life in the future. A large number of garment workers

thus work elsewhere, not only to improve their lives in the city, but also to become ‘modern women’ in the urban context. In light of this desire, the workers spend their leisure time relaxing or consuming, desiring a sense of modernity, by going out in search of entertainment, shopping or going to the cinema.

In many countries, studies have been undertaken by scholars concerning migrant factory workers, but there are few examples in the Lao case. There are some studies on migrant workers done in Laos, as described below.

In SENE-ASA Oloth’s research ‘The Transition of Garment Factory Girls into Prostitution in Laos,’ he describes how garment factory workers engage in prostitution in bars, but they are still concerned about their families as they often visit or send money to their parents. He also points out that service sector work, like working in bars, is a sideline work for the garment factory workers (SENE-ASA Oloth, 2007: 32). Similarly, Phouxay (Phouxay, 2001 and 2010) focuses on internal and international migration in Laos in an article about the status of garment factory workers. This article states that all garment workers come from a poor home environment, receive low wages and have low status while working at the factories.

In this study, some points regarding the migrant workers’ imaginations, the way they act as modern women and the way they adapt to urban life, are emphasized because these points seem to have been ignored by the research mentioned above.

## **The Garment Factory**

There are many garment factories in Laos, most of which are located in urban areas such as Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champasack Province. However, this research focused only on one garment factory in Vientiane to examine the feminization of modernity and the social lives of the female workers there. Compared to others, this factory has a greater diversity of ethnic groups and more single people, enabling the exploration and classification of the process of being modern that exists among them.

The factory opened on 6 January 1997, with the company’s head office located in Xaythany District, Vientiane, about four kilometers from the National University of Laos (NUOL). The factory is a joint venture of Laos (10% investment) and Vietnam, with 90%. The factory has 977 employees or workers,



of whom 96% (931) are women and 4% (46) are men. Two-thirds or 69% (678) of the workers are still single, about 28% (267) are married, and 3% (32) are divorced. The main products of this factory are industrial wear such as trousers, jackets and overalls, with an annual production of around 2.1 million pieces. The garments are made from imported high quality fabrics and are mainly for export. The factory has modern sewing machines, as well as a variety of auxiliary machines. Being so large, it is actually the premier garment company in Laos.

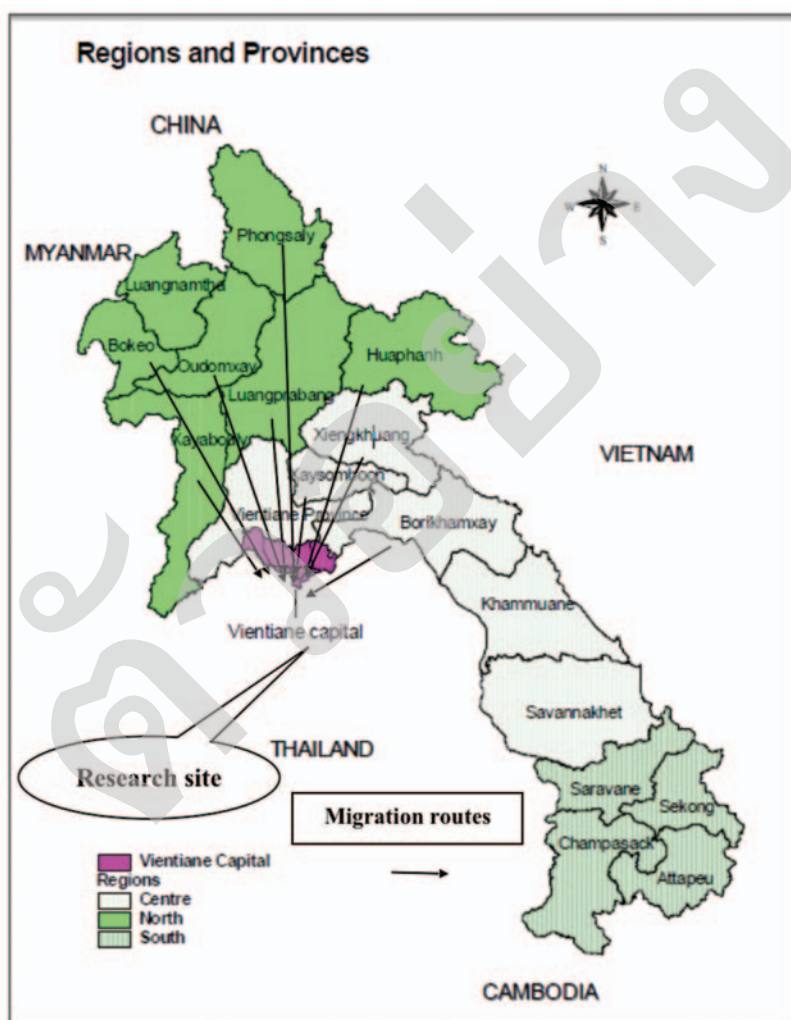


Figure 1.1: Map of Lao PDR - Regions and Provinces

Source: Kabmanivanh Phouxay 2010

To investigate the feminization of the modernity of female migrant workers in garment factories in Laos, the personal and general data about the specific factory worker groups, both inside and outside the dormitory were analyzed, such as the number of workers according to gender, status and age, their places of origin, the income of each worker, and so on. A field survey was used including interviews, focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews to understand the lifestyles of the female factory workers, including their feelings and motives, as well as their work experiences in the urban area. Ten per cent (10%) from nearly 1000 female factory workers between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five were selected.

Importantly, a visit to the head office was also allowed to meet the head (Mea Na or 'Mother Na') of the dormitory where the women live. She was supportive and talked about the general situation in the factory and also introduced the author to a number of workers, to become familiar with them and talk to them. Mea Na, who acted as research assistant, also helped in getting in touch with the informants.

To further understand the feminization of modernity, the in-depth interview questions were classified into five categories: the process of migration, values, consumption, leisure time activities and gender relations. Although there is a multi-group of workers in the factory such as married, unmarried and divorced workers, this study reveals the life stories of only single workers because the married and divorced women workers live outside the dormitory and live with their families in their own household. Furthermore, these groups have worked or generated income for their families only (for children or husband), thus their perception of being modern is not different or diverse. Asked about life in the city, they replied that their city life or city work was only to support their family or their children's schooling.

They are categorized into three main groups based on their ethnicity: 1) workers from the majority ethnic group - Lao Loum, 2) workers from the minority ethnic group - Lao Theung (Khmu), and 3) workers from the minority ethnic group - Lao Sung (Hmong).