

Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia: “Gender Relations in Laos since the New Economic Mechanism and “Critical Relativism: An Intersectional Approach to Gender Equality”

CSEAS’s Gender Equality Promotion Committee organized its Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia seminar on January 12, 2023. The presentations by Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath from the National University of Laos and Professor Sharon A. Bong of Monash University Malaysia, as well as insights from the commentators, Professors Chika Obiya and Yoko Hayami of CSEAS, stimulated a lively discussion around state rhetoric of equality; the changing status of women in socialist countries amid market reforms and globalization; the critical importance of land rights and gendered power dynamics within the family; intersectionality; critical relativism; faith-based approaches to advancing women's and human rights; and the limits of female political leaders.

Kisho Tsuchiya, assistant professor at CSEAS and a member of the gender equality promotion committee, began the seminar by noting that while Japan has a long, militant, and scholarly tradition of feminism and gender studies, various statistics, indicators, and everyday experiences demonstrate that the country is seriously lagging when it comes to gender equality and gender mainstreaming.

Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath is the Director of the Gender Studies Center and the Deputy Head of the History and Archaeology Department in the Faculty of Social Sciences, National University of Laos. She is a gender specialist and holds a doctoral degree from Humboldt University Berlin. With over 20 years of experience as a lecturer, researcher, trainer, and consultant in collaboration with national and international development agencies, she has a wide breadth of experience in the field of women rights and gender studies. She is well experienced in conducting fieldwork in rural communities, particularly among ethnic women in Laos. She uses qualitative methods and an interdisciplinary approach to conduct anthropology,

ethnolinguistic, history, human rights, and social impact assessment related research. The following is a brief version of Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath's presentation "Gender Relations in Laos Since the New Economic Mechanism" as well as related comments and questions from the commentators and audience.

What is Gender in Laos?

Whenever we discuss Laos, it is important to remember that in Lao, we do not have a term that directly translates as "gender." Instead, we use the term "gender roles" to refer to gender, so that today, people understand gender as gender roles, which has caused misunderstanding around the concept of gender. Most of the research also does not go beyond a focus on women's and men's roles. As we know, however, when you consider gender, you must look at the power relations in society.

Although Laos is small country of 7 million people, we have more than 160 ethnic groups (50 are officially recognized). Laos a mountainous, landlocked country, but it has become more land-linked with the opening of a railway to China, bridges to Thailand, and planned railways connecting it to other countries in Southeast Asia. Each ethnic group has their own tradition, culture, and language. Some have written language, and some do not. Traditional beliefs still play important roles for the Lao people. This is more pronounced in rural areas, but in urban areas as well, traditions still control the lives of men and women in the society. For example, when a Hmong woman is born, she belongs to her father, and after marriage (she must get married), she moves to her husband's house and stays with the parents of her husband. When her husband dies, she belongs to her son. She also changes her belief in her father's ancestors to her husband's when she gets married.

The New Economic Mechanism and the New Imagination Era in Laos

The political economic transformations of different periods have affected both men and women. Laos is currently a socialist country and therefore the construction of gender has been

influenced by Marxist and Leninist ideology, which says that women should be strong and work as members of the working class.

Laos reformed its economy in 1986 under the New Economic Mechanism, or NEM, as part of *Chintanakan Mai*, or the “New Imagination” era. The comprehensive policy of *Chintanakan Mai* opened Laos to all countries in the global economy, especially in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Chintanakan Mai* is a new way of thinking that aims to depart from the old way of thinking. In the old way, or *Chintanakan Gao*, we had a collective economy—everyone had to pass the same road and they received the same amount of profit. Many collective associations were not successful, because Lao people thought that although they worked so hard, they could not gain much, because the amount had to be distributed equally. But that was the idea, the concept of socialism, that everybody gets the same. The Party realized that the transition period to socialism may take longer than it expected and sought a new idea to help push the country forward. Therefore, in the 4th Party Congress of 1986 in Vientiane, the president of Laos introduced *Chintanakan Mai* and since then Laos has opened to the world.

If you ask Lao people, what are we now, are we capitalist or socialist, the answer might be, in terms of the economy, we must apply a market economy. In the beginning, the Party decided to achieve socialism for Laos without passing through any market economy, but it was not possible. The New Economic Mechanism reforms the central planned economy to a market economy. Today, the government considers that we are still moving along the way toward socialism, which is the final goal. But NEM has not only changed the economy, it also has impacted society and gender relations.

From Patriotic Daughters to “Loose” Women

Lao newspapers from the central economy period published numerous columns praising women as “Daughters of the Party.” We can see from the articles and their titles that

everything belongs to the state. This type of propaganda raised the society to follow the political ideology. Female workers, especially the laborers in the garment factories, played a very important role and the newspapers lauded them as good workers. Every issue of the newspaper would collect stories about women workers to show how they were very strong to work for the state.

But after NEM, the perception of women changed from female laborers as a good workers—as model women building the nation—to individual survivors with overactive or unusual sexual behavior. This was especially the case for women working in the garment factories, where working conditions are quite bad. When it came to the market economy, female workers were devalued. In terms of sexuality, female garment workers were stigmatized as sex workers.

Another consequence of NEM was that the number of female laborers increased in the service sector when Laos opened as a tourist destination. Many Lao women began working in restaurants, hotels, and so on. In terms of income, some of course could earn more than before, but in the Lao tradition, women are still expected to stay at home and work in the household. Human trafficking has also increased as Laos opened to foreign investors. We see cases of Chinese investors who are already married in their home country, but who keep a Lao wife when they come to Laos for a few years. Many marry, but not with the official documents.

The Colonial Legacy of Women's Property Rights in Laos and the Impact of Privatization

Most historians begin Laos' history in the 14th century, with the unification of the Lane Xang Kingdom. Laos was under Siam from 1778 until 1893 and after that, it was colonized by France. In that short period of time America interfered. Laos was liberated and gained independence in 1975. The political shifts significantly affected Lao women. For example, when French colonial authorities conducted surveys to collect taxes, they demanded that Lao people have a family name. Among matrilineal groups, Lao women inherited land from their parents. But, when they were required to take a family name, it became her husband's name, and the land was

registered in his name. This reduced women's rights to property, especially the right of the land. This has had far-reaching impacts which continue today.

For example, when Lao women quit their job as a government officer because the salary is very low (within a couple, it is always the woman who leaves her job), they may open a small shop at home so that they can take care of their children and earn some money. In Laos, half of small enterprises are run by women. But limited access to credit and financial facilities is a challenge. To get a loan to do business requires many documents, including a land title/ land certificate. This causes a big problem for women, because although they have only a small shop at home, they do not have a business certificate. They do not want to apply for the land certificate get a bank loan, because for a Lao woman, it is very dangerous—of course the husband will not allow her to do that.

Privatization in Laos is another huge challenge. Everything is owned by the state. Since NEM, an individual can own land, but the land registration process is conducted solely by men. The head of the family in the family household registration book is always the man, so when the authorities arrive in a village to register land, it is always the men who join the process and only the husband's name is written on the land certificate. In this way, women lose their right to the land, even if that piece of land is inherited from her parents. This problem continues today.

The government has begun a project to promote gender equality in land rights, allowing couples to write two names on the land title. Therefore, the number of women who own land has increased, but it is still difficult. Among the couple, a woman does not dare to ask her husband to put her name on the title, because this causes a conflict when the husband thinks that she does not trust him. So, women keep quiet. They do this, and when it comes to divorce, women have no rights to the property.

Limits of the Political Sphere

The NEM has had some positive impact. Especially in the beginning, the government promoted education for all, particularly for girls. With a higher education, girls and young women have opportunities to continue their job and study abroad. In this way, many Lao women have upgraded their status from the grassroots to the middle class.

But of course, this is not always reflected in the political sphere. Political opportunities are reserved for those women who already have family or parents who played a very important role in society before independence. When it comes to high-ranking positions in the leadership, the field is not open. The number of women Politburo members is extremely small, and Laos has never had a female president or prime minister. Laos has had a few female ministers, including the Minister of Education and the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare. Although there are some women in today's Cabinet, not many of them play an important role. Laos had one female president of the National Assembly, but she is now retired. Overall, only 10 percent of high-ranking positions are held by women.

The Phonsena family in Laos provides an illustrative example. Among the family members, three siblings (two sisters and one brother) are in one government cabinet as ministers. In Laos, and it may be similar to other countries, if you have connections, if your family is strong in politics, you can maintain a higher position. But this is not the case for ordinary people. Of course, some ordinary people may reach high positions, but very few lead the country.

Comments and Questions

Professor **Yoko Hayami** provided comments based on her research experience with ethnic communities in Thailand. The following is a brief version of her comments.

We do not have much information about gender in Laos. To understand Laos, we tend to look at the two Asian socialist countries, Vietnam and China, which also have very strong economic and political influence on Laos presently, and Thailand, which has strong historical and cultural

connections to Laos. It was said that in both Vietnam and China, women's status rose during the socialist period and then as the market economy came in and liberation took place, women's status regressed to a certain extent. This was a stronger tendency in Vietnam in terms of discrimination against women and lower wages. The similarity is that in both countries, there is a stronger double burden because both countries expect women to be in the labor force, but their household roles—of taking care of children, the elderly, and so on—are enhanced because the state services have not continued, and many things are privatized. These are the kinds of comparisons that we hear about among the socialist countries. Thailand, like Laos, is a bilateral kinship-organized country with matrilocal residence so that women's role in the household is large—and expected to be large. This means that women have status in the household, but they also have responsibility, so it falls very heavily on women to go out and work. As the period of the socialist planned economy was very short for Laos, how do you locate Laos in these configurations in terms of differences and similarities?

Professor Chika Obiya provided commentary from the viewpoint of gender and socialism based on her own research field of Uzbekistan, an ex-Soviet federation Muslim country, and introduced some experiences of Soviet, post-Soviet, and Central Asian studies. She noted that it may be interesting to compare Laos to cases of former Soviet states and Soviet styled socialist states in Eastern Europe in the framework of post-socialist states, especially post-socialist anthropology, which is very active in Japan, and/or more general transitional studies in politics or economics, which have been very active trends after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regarding gender issues, there remains keen interest in this research framework. The following is a brief version of her comments.

Women's Liberation and Gender Equality from the Soviet Perspective

The Soviet regime and the Communist Party pursued its own women's liberation with the goal of achieving equality between men and women. This promoted women's participation in economic and social activities, making women workers, and socialized housekeeping and childcare. Introduced in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, very roughly speaking, these goals were

more or less achieved in the 20th century, as we see an equality of men and women in terms of labor, labor opportunity, and wages in Soviet official statistical figures.

However, gender studies have pointed to the wage gap between blue collar (mostly men) and white collar (mostly women) workers, with the standard wages for blue collar workers being higher than for white collar workers in the Soviet Union. In other words, the wage gap was reflected as a wage gap between men and women, because more men were blue collar workers due to the physical work. Studies also highlight that men were not approached to support working women, and as a result, Soviet women were always exhausted from full time labor, housekeeping, and childcare, or the triple burden, which they very often coped with only by themselves. At the same time, no attention was paid to LGBTQ issues in terms of equality of rights. During the Stalin period and afterwards, gay (but not lesbian) relationships were a crime. I suppose the Soviet Union never knew the term gender, which includes sexual minorities.

After the Soviet disunion in 1991, ideological socialist equality between men and women was lost and gender studies find that women became victims of the transitional change and the market economy. Other studies focus on women, especially private entrepreneurs, who survived the transitional period by making subjective choices.

Global Standards versus Local Realities

To take an example of my field of Uzbekistan, it seems that some global standards like SDG goals sometimes conflict with post-socialist revival or reinterpretation of national local traditions, national values, traditional beliefs, and religion. We see that especially when the regime is authoritarian, like in Uzbekistan, somehow these global criteria are very quickly met in the official figures by a command from above. For example, last year Uzbekistan adopted the decision to achieve gender equality by 2030 and this year it reached its target that 30 percent of parliamentary candidates from each political party should be women. But of course, these targets do not solve all the problems regarding gender equality in the society. Anthropological studies have found that informal polygamy is widespread and gay relationships are still a crime

in Uzbekistan. Although Uzbekistan uses the term gender, gender in Uzbekistan still means only the relationship between men and women. We must pay attention carefully to the reality of people's daily lives as well as the history of a country's modernization and its cultural background.

In Laos, was there any Party-led socialist campaign or movement for the liberation of women? If so, what was it like and has it impacted today's gender situation? What do you think are the factors interfering with the promotion of gender equality today in Laos?

Responses

During the national liberation struggle, the Lao Party asserted that if the nation was liberated, then the women would be liberated. But after independence, women have remained lower than men. The explanation is that women were not only exploited or controlled by colonization, but also by the patriarchy, or the patriarchal system. As the Party ostensibly does not operate as a patriarchal system, they explain that due to "family matters"—because women must be responsible for the family—women cannot advance at the same level of the men. After independence in 1975, there was no clear policy on equality for women and men, because they were treated the same as workers. But since NEM, the promotion of women has been associated with the development issue. Today the Lao Women's Labor Union has the campaign to achieve the three values of "good citizen," "good development" and "good family." As Laos opened to the international community, it also signed CEDAW and many international conventions, which has applied outside pressure on the government to commit to promote gender equality in Laos.

During the war, women played very important roles—they joined the movement secretly, transporting weapons, food, and everything to the soldiers. They supported the movement. The Party recognizes this at every Party Congress. In a speech in Congress, the former president Kaisone Phomvihanh argued that women are very important and that without women, Laos would not be liberated and independent. In a party congress, he complained that the Party

Congress has very few female representatives. Why do we still today (in this congress) have few women?

Question

How many of the ten percent of high-ranking female officials push for women's rights? In the Philippines, even though statistically it looks good on paper, many female politicians do not push for women's or LGBT rights. How many of the women, especially those in the Politburo, make visible statements? Do they actively push for gender rights?

Response

There was only one female member of the Politburo to do so. Today there are two female members of the Politburo. There are more female National Assembly representatives, but the number of top leaders is very small.