WOMEN’S ROLE IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: ENHANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN WAN YAI DISTRICT, MUKDAHAN PROVINCE, THAILAND

Suchittra Ritsakulchai

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This research was conducted using a qualitative method. The objectives were: 1) to study women’s roles in local development; 2) to analyze the supporting and hindrance factors that affect the roles of women in the local area; and 3) to suggest pathways for the roles of women in local development to reduce gender inequality in Thai society.

Method: The collective data came from in-depth interviews with provincial and district developers. Women's empowerment working groups conducted focus groups in four districts: Wan-Yai, Cha-Note, Bang-Sai Noi, and Pong-Kam Dong-Moo. Furthermore, the researcher focused on the women villagers to analyze the factors that influence women's empowerment in the local area and make recommendations to the local administration's women's development strategic plan.

Results: Women's role in the Wan Yai district is significant. Women also participate in many aspects of the local community. Regarding politics, some women are interested in applying for local elections, and others work as public health volunteers. In economic terms, many women are essential to generating income and development in the area. Most women in the district are members of the Women's Empowerment Fund, a low-interest source promoting job creation and building careers.

Research Implication: Regarding culture, women's groups participated in local traditions, such as the Twelve Annual Festivals of Isan People and the Christmas Celebration. Strong women's organizations and women's participation at all levels supported women's empowerment. However, the obstructing factors to women's development were competition from locals with similar careers and the emigration of the working-age population and younger generations.

Originality/Value: In summary, the recommendations for the relevant organizations are the network and women's empowerment organizations, NGOs, and educational institutions to integrate abstractly, investigate, and evaluate continually towards the provincial strategic plan.

Keywords: Women’s role, Local Development, Wan Yai, Mukdahan.
Resultados: O papel das mulheres no distrito de Wan Yai é significativo. As mulheres também participam em muitos aspectos da comunidade local. Em relação à política, algumas mulheres se interessam em se candidatar às eleições locais e outras trabalham como voluntárias em saúde pública. Em termos econômicos, muitas mulheres são essenciais para gerar renda e desenvolvimento na área. A maioria das mulheres no distrito é membro do Fundo de Empoderamento das Mulheres, uma fonte de baixo interesse que promove a criação de empregos e a construção de carreiras.

Implicação da pesquisa: Em relação à cultura, grupos de mulheres participaram de tradições locais, como os Doze Festivais Anuais do Povo Isan e a Celebração de Natal. Organizações fortes de mulheres e a participação das mulheres em todos os níveis apoiaram o empoderamento das mulheres. No entanto, os fatores que impediram o desenvolvimento das mulheres foram a concorrência de habitantes locais com carreiras semelhantes e a emigração da população em idade ativa e das gerações mais jovens.

Originalidade/valor: Em resumo, as recomendações para as organizações relevantes são a rede e organizações de empoderamento das mulheres, ONGs e instituições de ensino para integrar de forma abstrata, investigar e avaliar continuamente em direção ao plano estratégico provincial.


EL PAPEL DE LA MUJER EN EL DESARROLLO LOCAL: POTENCIAR EL GÉNERO IGUALDAD EN EL DISTRITO DE WAN YAI, PROVINCIA DE MUKDAHAN, TAILANDIA

RESUMEN

Propósito: Esta investigación se llevó a cabo utilizando un método cualitativo. Los objetivos eran: 1) estudiar el papel de la mujer en el desarrollo local; 2) analizar los factores de apoyo y obstáculos que afectan al papel de la mujer en el área local; y 3) sugerir vías para el papel de la mujer en el desarrollo local a fin de reducir la desigualdad de género en la sociedad tailandesa.

Método: Los datos colectivos provienen de entrevistas en profundidad con desarrolladores provinciales y distritales. Los grupos de trabajo para el empoderamento de las mujeres llevaron a cabo grupos focales en cuatro distritos: Wan-Yai, Cha-Note, Bang-Sai Noi y Pong-Kam Dong-Moo. Además, la investigadora se centró en las mujeres aldeanas para analizar los factores que influyen en el empoderamiento de las mujeres en el área local y hacer recomendaciones al plan estratégico de desarrollo de la mujer de la administración local.

Resultados: El rol de las mujeres en el distrito de Wan Yai es significativo. Las mujeres también participan en muchos aspectos de la comunidad local. En cuanto a la política, algunas mujeres están interesadas en postularse para las elecciones locales, y otras trabajan como voluntarias de salud pública. En términos económicos, muchas mujeres son esenciales para generar ingresos y desarrollo en la zona. La mayoría de las mujeres en el distrito son miembros del Fondo de Empoderamiento de la Mujer, una fuente de bajo interés que promueve la creación de empleo y la construcción de carreras.

Implicación de la investigación: En cuanto a la cultura, los grupos de mujeres participaron en las tradiciones locales, como los 12 festivales anuales del pueblo isleño y la celebración de Navidad. Las organizaciones de mujeres fuertes y la participación de las mujeres en todos los niveles apoyaron el empoderamiento de las mujeres. Sin embargo, los factores que obstaculizan el desarrollo de la mujer son la competencia de los locales con carreras similares y la emigración de la población en edad de trabajar y de las generaciones más jóvenes.

Originalidad/Valor: En resumen, las recomendaciones para las organizaciones relevantes son la red y las organizaciones de empoderamiento de las mujeres, ONG e instituciones educativas para integrarse de manera abstracta, investigar y evaluar continuamente hacia el plan estratégico provincial.

Palabras clave: Rol De La Mujer, Desarrollo Local, Wan Yai, Mukdahan.
1 INTRODUCTION

Thai women now play a more significant role than they did in the past, whether in politics, economics, or society. Women are not merely wives and mothers who are only responsible for household chores and raising children. Many women are as knowledgeable and competent as men and, therefore, can be a powerful driving force in developing society (Department of Local Administration, Thailand, n.d.).

In 2014, women’s political participation at the local level was low; the proportion of local executives between males and females was only 7% of those in Provincial Administrative Organizations (Municipalities and Subdistrict Administrative Organizations). Meanwhile, the provincial administration had only 12% of women in the provincial government (College of Local Government Development, King Prajadhipok’s Institute, 2008). According to preliminary data, women had a low proportion of participation in politics, government, and administration.

As a result, it is essential to focus on the empowerment of women, especially in local governmental organizations, which are public agencies close to the people. Provincial Administrative Organizations recognize and understand women’s problems in the areas. Consequently, the organizations must support women’s empowerment in education, health, occupation, income security, capacity development, and political participation. The development must cover women of all ages: children, teenagers, laborers, and seniors.

This study was conducted in the Wan Yai District area, located in the north of Mukdahan Province, about 33 kilometers from Mukdahan City Hall. It borders the Mekong River on the side of Xaignabouli City, Savannakhet Province, Laos PDR. Furthermore, the government has declared the district a unique economic development zone. Collectively, there are 38 villages in the Wan Yai, Pong Kham Dong Moo, Bang Sai Noi, and Chanod sub-districts. According to the Wai Yai Civil Registration Records, in 2021, the total population was 19,778, of which 9,898 were male and 9,880 were female. Most people were engaged in agriculture, with about 80% farming as the main occupation. From 2006 to 2008, the growth rate was only 4.26%. The average income per person per year was 40,520 baht. The lowest average annual income per person was 36,936 baht in Chanod sub-district (Wan Yai District, n.d: 40).
According to the population data, the number of women on the ground was close to that of men. Therefore, the area's development requires female-driven development as well. Furthermore, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 5, achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, emphasizes inclusive, transformative, and integrated development, which all nations must implement universally. At the same time, it focuses on implementing practices and solving problems locally. Although SDGs are global targets, this concept could be modified to fit localization, as meaningful targets and indicators play a crucial role in implementing the SDG.

2 OBJECTIVES

There were three main goals: 1) to study the role of women in local development in Wan Yai district, Mukdahan Province; 2) to study the supportive factors and obstacles to the development of women’s roles in local development; and 3) to suggest ways to empower women's roles in local development to reduce gender inequality in Thai society.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of women's groups has led to changes in many aspects of women's lifestyles, such as their ability to resolve family financial problems. According to Damrong
Ongkase (1997), women's integration has two components: informal and official. Informal integration is a traditional integration commonly found to help each other under the community's social relationships system. The group structure does not have a prominent definition of group members' roles, status, and norms. The second component, official integration, arose from the state's policy to form a formal group based on the natural group that existed in the community. Formal groups have defined the structure of their actions using state-oriented approaches in conjunction with the community's way of life, for example, identifying roles and responsibilities and determining status, norms, behaviors, and rules within the community.

Women’s groups in Thailand play a significant role in economic, social, and cultural development. In particular, the role of women in the Northeast was very prominent because most men in the region worked in various other places, including abroad, due to agriculture not being a reliable source of income. The uncertainty of rainfall causes. Water shortages in this region result in people needing help cultivating plants and fruits, leading to poor habitats, and inevitably, many men have to work in the city or abroad. Consequently, the role of women in the Northeast is more extensive than in other areas. Lakkana Yoga-Visai and Chumphon Nimpanich (2016, p.135-148) studied the promotion of the role of municipal women’s groups in economic development by analyzing the factors that promote and hinder the role of women's groups as well as suggesting ways to improve the role of women's groups in such areas. The findings showed that the municipality needed to do more to promote the role of women in the economic, social, and cultural development of the local community. Meanwhile, women's groups played a role in these community developments by earning income from secondary occupations. Women's groups participated in village development activities and local traditions, such as the Twelve Annual Festivals of the Isan People.

Meanwhile, factors that supported women's roles included the concept of equality between men and women, awareness of human rights, increased social opportunities for women, and changes in the socio-economic structure that made women more influential. The main obstacles were coordination and the fact that many women believed they were less capable than men. To rectify this, a coordination organization should be established that promotes and supports activities in women's groups, encourages women to have self-confidence and see their potential, promotes women to receive a higher level of education, stimulates women's groups to participate in the exchange of knowledge, builds a community network, and encourages everyone in the community to change their opinion that developmental attitudes must only be a man’s duty.
4 METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative methodology to gather information on the development of women’s roles in Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province. Data was collected primarily through focus groups and in-depth interviews, followed by data analysis.

*Documentary research, or content analysis, involves studying information about the role of women in local development through relevant literature surveys, such as books, publications, research reports, pamphlets, academic journals, laws, and related websites.*

*Field research* involved a survey and data collection at the local level. Observation is a non-participant; the researcher explores the behavior, way of life, well-being, and general circumstances.

*A focus group* was conducted with four women's working groups for local development in Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province. The groups consisted of women's empowerment committees from the sub-districts of Chanod, Bang Sai Noi, Wan Yai, and Pong Kham Dong Moo.

*An in-depth interview* involved a structured interview, and there were two groups of samples: the formal groups (community development specialists at the provincial and district levels) and the villagers.

*Data Analysis:* Interview transcripts, observations, and all primary source data were analyzed. Then, a descriptive analysis of the data was written. Secondary data was analyzed comprehensively to complete the study's findings, eventually leading to the writing of this research paper.

5 RESULTS

Women's empowerment in the Wan Yai district is significant. Some women are interested in political activities; for example, some women become candidates for election as village leaders. Meanwhile, other women work as public health volunteers and security volunteers. Regarding culture, women's groups participate actively in traditional activities, such as the Folk Christmas Celebration and creating Isan ethnic clothing patterns.
In particular, empowering women's roles in the Wan Yai district was an essential part of local development, especially career development (the primary mechanism) to generate household income. Specifically, there are essential organizations called Women's Development Committees at the village, sub-district, and district levels. Organizations of each of the three levels are responsible for proposing projects to allocate budgets to develop skills, such as career, leadership, and computer skills, for women's groups in the local area.

Generally, at the district level, the Wan Yai District Community Development Office is the leading organization that develops the potential of the leader of the women's organization, especially a village-level women's organization.

The sub-district level has a Women's Development Committee, which is responsible for managing projects and the governmental budget. The aim is to develop skills in leadership, computers, and knowledge.
The Women's Role Development Fund also drives a working board at the village level, the Village Women's Development Committee. The aim is to encourage women leaders at the village level to learn and apply knowledge gained from training to effectively implement it in daily life for families and communities.

According to data collection, there were significant supporting and obstructing factors to the role of women's development in the area as follows:

**Supporting factors**

a) Local development significantly generated income for local women through activities such as "one Tambol One Product or OTOP" agriculture. The communities have developed continuously, and the area has become a tourist attraction.

b) Strong women's organizations, soliciting cooperation with women's groups and providing complete and voluntary cooperation.

c) Women's Development Fund: It has increased women's roles and generated greater income for families and women themselves. This fund is a low-interest source that promotes job creation and career building and is considered a great opportunity for all women.

**Obstructing factors**

a) The residents of similar occupation areas were competitive, and there was no diversity in the production of goods.

b) Most members were elderly, while teenagers came out to borrow money to start a career.
c) The allocation of public budgets did not respond to the community's needs because there were no inquiries or public opinions from residents.

d) According to Women’s Role Development Funds, members who borrowed mostly had primary occupations; they borrowed from this fund for additional occupations.

e) Most women needed to gain knowledge and understanding of access to funding, borrowing, and management.

Figure 3
Women's occupation group in Wan Yai District

Source: the author

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role of women in local development is significant to the extent that women in Wan Yai district are grouped in all sub-districts. Developing women's roles in this area are essential agencies: Village's Women Development Committee, Sub-district's Women Development Committee, and District's Women Development Committee. Moreover, most women are members of the Women's Role Development Fund. The supporting factors for women's development were strong women's organizations, women's participation at all levels, and the Women's Development Fund. Nevertheless, the obstructing factors for women's development were competing with locals in similar occupations, working-age population emigration, and lack of knowledge of the Women's Role Development Fund.

7 DISCUSSION

In Wan Yai district, there were groups of women in all sub-districts. Most women were members of the Women’s Development Fund and borrowed only for additional occupations to
mitigate the family's financial problems. Under the research of Damrong Ongkase (1997), who studied two types of women's groupings, formal and informal integrations, the role of women in Wan Yai district is combined with informal and formal groups. The informal group is a traditional grouping commonly founded to help each other under the social relations system to the extent that inhabitants have unique traditions and norms. Whenever the festivals occur, many women in the community participate harmoniously in every festival, such as sailing long-tailed-boat competition, folk Christmas Celebration, and wearing a traditional Isan dress on special occasions.

Meanwhile, formal groupings were implemented by the state's policy to follow the basics of the natural groups that existed in the community. The Women's Development Fund is one of the government's urgent policies under Yingluck Shinawatra's government in 2012. The aim is to develop a low-interest circular funding source to provide women with access to funding to invest in their careers, create jobs, and generate income. Consequently, many women in the Wan Yai district are interested in this fund, and many members have borrowed money to create jobs by adapting to the local resources appropriately.

Additionally, many women in Wan Yai district were often involved in activities held by the district or province, such as annual celebrations, sailing long-tailed-boat competitions, and Christmas celebrations. The villagers still retained their uniqueness and cultural art. Meanwhile, government agencies, including Provincial and District Community Development, helped support indirect loans to preserve artistic and cultural heritage, such as indigenous Isan clothing and living culture. By the study of Lakkana Yoga-Visai and Chumphon Nimpanich (2016, p.135–148), women had a role in the economic, social, and cultural development of communities by contributing to income through complementary occupations, participating in various activities in village development, and participating in local traditional activities. According to their study, the supporting factors included gender equality, social opportunities for women, and changes in socio-economic structure. However, the hindrance factors included a lack of coordination, and some women thought of themselves as having less potential than men. The results of this study were significantly different from the study of Lakkana et al. To the extent that the supporting factors included strong women's organizations, women's participation in many aspects, and the Women's Development Fund. However, the hindrance factors included competitors with similar careers, labor movement, and misunderstanding about the Women's Development Fund.
8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Significant recommendations were established during this study, which have been divided into two parts:

A) Recommendations for the province

To study, research, and collect information about current laws and regulations that still have problems or are outdated, including defining and proposing measures to promote the development of local women’s roles.

To create opportunities for targeted women to pursue careers in order to increase their income by developing skills, expertise, and knowledge, expanding opportunities to access news, information, and knowledge for business careers and marketing support, and educating about skills in managing finances, capital, and debt effectively.

To gather knowledge about implementing women's development mechanisms by comparing lessons and experiences from different districts to develop a strategy for developing women's roles at a higher level.

To develop and strengthen provincial mechanisms and women's development organizations at various levels, NGOs, and educational institutions, connecting integrated networks to monitor and evaluate the results by working groups from the community, district, and provincial levels.

B) Recommendations for the district

To encourage local communities and organizations to participate in women’s development processes in each region and play a key role in caring for women in disadvantaged situations.

To promote the Women's Development Fund to new target groups, such as new generations, to apply for financial support for their careers.

REFERENCES


Ongkase, Damrong. (1997). *integration of women with development in community*. Chiang Mai: Graduate School Chiang Mai University, retrieved on 2021 March 1, from http://repository.cmu.ac.th/handle/6653943832/23421

