

# Becoming a Female factory worker: The Choice of Indigenous Women in the New Mechanism Era of Lao PDR.

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**Abstract:** This research is a study of the stories shared by eight women from ethnic minorities, who tell about the causes for their decision to go to work in a factory in the city of Vientiane. The research found that the voices of the eight women point out that the issues in the process of looking for work come from pressure of various types. They include the reproduction of patterns of responsibility for the family in their position as women, changes of agricultural methods towards monocultures, which cause changes in planting methods, lack of male work force in the agricultural sector, problems due to government projects on land management, which do not suit their original cultural characteristics and that working in the agricultural sector does not offer attractive attributes for the perspective of being a “modern woman”. These stories portray Laos’ economic development policies, which originated in the new mechanism era. What is clearly shown is that the policies widely affect the population in various areas and reach beyond work related changes. The term “Sao rong ngan” (young female factory worker) for the large number of ethnic minority women from the countryside, who go to work in factories in Laos is a designation that is defined in a negative sense. It shows that government policies and new liberal capitalism lead to inequalities in the development of cities compared to the countryside, including infrastructure and human resources development.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Women, New Mechanism Era of Lao PDR, Capitalism, Women Labor, Modernization.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Patuxai monument” where was completed in 1969 and 6 years later communists could gain control and announce the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic on the 2nd of December 1975 (Evans: 2006, 181), has now before 11 o’clock on Sundays become an embodiment of city life. You can see young women and men who meet there in groups to take selfies together with the Patuxai and when enough time has passed, some groups get on vehicles opposite the Patuxai, whilst some walk straight to the That Fun temple. If you follow them you will see that the women and men go through the That Fun temple to the markets “Talat Sao” and “Talat Khua Din”, shopping spots for antiques of Vientiane. What can be seen there made the researcher wonder who these people are, where they are from and why they came to the capital Vientiane, particularly the group of the many young women who mostly converse with problems with the Lao language – and almost all of these young women that can be found, come from other provinces. To the most part, they belong to ethnic minority groups and they work in various factories in Vientiane. This piece of writing should therefore serve as an attempt to find explanations for the developments in their lives.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher spent one year from January 2016 to January 2017 for data collection at the location of a factory and its surroundings in the capital Vientiane through the methods of in-depth interviews, conversation groups and participant and non-participant observation. The target group of those who provide information, are eight factory staff and former factory staff members who are 18 to 23 years old. It draws from the experiential analysis by Shulamit Reinharz (1993), which

focusses on research that is based exclusively on the analysis of experiences of those women and the viewpoint that experiences are knowledge. The researcher used qualitative research methods for ethnography. The objective was to show changes in the life of ethnic minority women under the rule in the socialist system that needs to apply capitalist models because of diverse factors under the system of development in Laos. This thinking concept does not only focus on the women's experiences, but also takes effort to create understanding of Laos' development pathway through the women's experiences.<sup>i</sup>

### 3. RESULTS

#### The development process of the country and the garment factories

After its victory, the creation of a one-party system, which moved the government of Laos in the same political and administrative direction as the society of the world with growing economic capitalism, the situation of a world that implements transnational policies, international organizations, banks for aid and the breakdown of the Soviet Union all were factors because of which the government of Laos had to change economic policies to retain the stability of the communist government (Stuart-Fox: 2558, 393-403). The policy for economic development of Laos therefore started to move on into the new economic mechanism (or NEM) era. NEM can be further divided into two phases: The first phase from 1986-2000 was a preparation to open up market mechanisms. In that five year plan, the government still tried to develop agriculture, to find industrial and trade models and to create a growing economy. In the second phase from 2000 until 2016, the focus has been on industry and modernity, with an emphasis on energy, agriculture, industry, mining, tourism and construction work and the aim to leave the status of a poor country by 2020 (Oraboune: 2011, 269-273). Laos' economic development now has clearer directives to open for investment in various areas, including agriculture, mining, industry, energy and tourism, and special economic zones in several areas of the country have been determined. The economic development of Laos encountered abrupt changes and an unequal growth of economy in cities as opposed to the countryside. Only very few products had been created in the country. The communist party tried to create mechanisms through assembling and centering absolute political power. This was implemented with actions such as the design of the constitution, laws and policies on administration, which was referred to as streamlined or imperative policies. Actions had to originate from the center and then spread to the regions.

In the process of economic and social development of Laos, which needs to create results in its efforts to leave its status as a poor country in 2020 as in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for development as stipulated internationally, government groups were formed on various levels to set policies and regulations for development in the country with financial institutions and intra-national institutions. These institutions and groups have influenced Laos in its era of change (UNDP Lao PDR: 2012-2015, 1), so that it had to focus on industry through building factories and exporting natural resources. That is why Laos implemented economic policies with investments and energy and more land for commercial plant cultivation was left out (Menon and Warr: 2013, 12). Because of the significant economic differences between Vientiane and other areas in terms of income, policies have been implemented to build up the economy in other areas with land leasing policies for activities such as for minerals, forestry, energy and even commercial plant cultivation. These things cause changes and let more people who provide work force move to work in Vientiane, especially the large group of young women from other areas, who go to work in the tailoring factories.

The industry of garment factories was also one element where this took place in response to the implementation of the new mechanism era policies. That is why the industrial sector of the country has grown owing to the efforts of the government of Laos to create economic growth with industries since 1986. Within the industrial sector, the garment industry has been a branch with a huge significance in Laos since 1990. In the initial phase, merely two locations were established. Fast growth took place with investments by 2000. At present, there are as many as 463 garment factories, namely 49 large factories (with a work force of 500 people and more), 18 medium-sized factories (with a work force of 100-499 people) and 406 small factories (with a work force of not more than 100 people). Between 2006 and 2009, important export markets were Europe and America (GDA: 2013, 18-19). The report by Richard Record (2011) found that garment factories were the largest official segment of hiring work force in Laos. There is a high quitting rate of roughly 40-50% per year in employment. The initial result of research with the target group was that the workers largely consisted of women from the countryside, who found that working in the factories offered them more opportunities than work in the agricultural sector.

### Why the choice to go to a factory?

In data on previous members of staff in factories during the initial phase starting from 1989, it could be found that the young women in factories in that initial phase were mostly women in the area of Vientiane Capital or towns close to Vientiane Capital. There were workers aged 13 upwards (Chang:June11,2016). Their everyday-life circulated solely around the house and the factory. Everybody had to view the factory as a company that was like their own house and they had to protect its reputation. Due to the context at that time after the revolution and the temporary isolation of the country, the emergence of factories meant a chance for women who were poor or came from displaced families with several scattered members. There was a large number of girls going to work in factories who had not joined the educational system because they did not see paths for the future after education due to the instability of the political and administrative situation. Starting work at a factory was therefore a good chance to start looking for income in that phase of social changes.

In the situation after the opening of the country, being a young woman employed in a factory was considered a form of honest livelihood in the thinking model of being “laborer’s work force”, which was different from being work force in the agricultural sector, who jointly fought for administrative changes. The factory work force was a modern work force in terms of working with scheduled working hours and reliable wage payment. The view of young, factory-employed women in the initial phase was therefore positive, since exports of the country largely depended on the production by Laos’ industrial factories, which had a larger value than production in the agricultural sector.

Then there was the third development plan (1996-2000) to reduce the gap between the city and the countryside. In the mountain areas the relocation of the population into the proximity of the cities started. Wood was cut and land was leased out for agriculture. This was one reason leading to more resettlements among the population (Stuart-Fox: 2558, 410-413). It was due to this resettlement among the population that more ethnic minority women workers went to work in factories. The depictions shared by Chang, a young, female ex-factory worker, who changed her job and now sells spicy papaya salad in front of the factory show the economic situation with many different stakeholders. The popularity of factory work among city people has changed because the income from other work and the working conditions are better than in the factories. The use of a work force from other areas for replacement in the context of unpopularity of factory work among city people is due to more investments in the city in various business areas, because of which young city women have more opportunities to choose a job. Factory work has become an aim for young women from other provinces rather than for residents of the city. The phenomenon of more young women from the countryside going to work in factories has occurred since approximately 2005-2007.

The eight young, factory-employed women that the researcher spoke to are young females aged 18-23 years. All of them come from other provinces of Laos and all of them belong to ethnic groups other than the Lao Loum (Lowland Lao – the national majority). They concluded their normal education between grades 5-11. All of them can communicate with the national language. All eight of them dress with modern, popular clothes, wear make up and have their hair styled and colored at every meeting. They use smartphones and highly popular applications, such as What’s App, LINE and facebook. Seven out of the eight young women have a family working in agriculture with rice as the main produce for consumption and commercially grown plants from monocultures, like manioc, corn, rubber and job’s tear. As for the remaining person, none of the family members has remained in the original village. All have gone away to work abroad and in large cities.

There are many reasons for the decision to go to factories. The situation that can be seen most clearly from the stories told is:

**Point one:** Growing plants commercially as the main source of income (for six families) provides an income that is not certain. Factory work is seen as more certain in terms of income compared to agricultural production. Wages in the factory are paid every two weeks and there is basic salary plus money for working overtime. This is different from the agricultural sector with its high uncertainties in various areas. Won, a young woman of Thai Daeng<sup>ii</sup> ethnicity from Hua Phan Province, who is 20 years old, told about job’s tears and corn farming where there are various factors they depend on, such as weather conditions, water, insect pests, plant diseases and purchasing companies, and there is no certainty in any year. The price is fixed by the companies but no guarantee about selling prices and how much they will go down or up. The price control of economic cultivation by foreign companies is a result of the fact that the Laotian government allowed foreign private businesses to invest in the agricultural sector in 2005. The policy for agricultural produce increase

for trade is a concept that came up in 1988 and is a policy for the export of agricultural products (FAO: 2011, 2-4) by the government after entering the new mechanism era. This concept is an element of changing the way of thinking among ethnic groups in terms of production and changing from the agricultural system in its original form to production for sale. Work force in the family is used in agricultural production for trade because it is an economic opportunity for households in the context of support with the government policy to increase production for sales to develop the country and focus on poverty eradication. While forest areas are cleared for more production due to leasing by transnational companies, the government or for other reasons, previous resources are increasingly limited with laws on their use and many bans on wood cutting, animal hunting and even gathering forest products. The ethnic minority population which, to a large extent, used to spend their original life living on food from forests must face difficulties or more expenses to acquire food. The development of more basic public utilities comes along with higher expenditures. Looking for an income is an important concern in one's life and the female work force in some families, in which there is already sufficient work force for agriculture, hence needs to look for other work to do so that the family income grows. Employed work in the industrial sector, which is concentrated in large cities therefore becomes a choice for such a female work force.

**Point two:** The lack of a main work force in the agricultural sector among families is another reason for the decision to turn to the industrial sector. This means the lack of a male work force in households that can work hard in the agricultural sector. 19 year old Duean's family from the Kammu ethnic group<sup>iii</sup> is a family raised by a single mother who cannot do agriculture as would actually be possible with the amount of land. For this reason, working in agriculture was not sufficient to have enough to eat, particularly rice. Dependency between the sexes in the agricultural sector work plays an important role in successful production. However, in some families in which domestic violence has occurred or in which the male work force has died, the production in the agricultural sector cannot sustain families in which there are only women. Therefore, looking for income to buy rice or hiring male work force in the hard work in the agricultural sector is something that appears and income from work in the industrial sector can help in this respect.

**Point three:** Problems with the allocation of land for food production in some cases cause a collapse of the agricultural sector that scatters families, such as the family of Phon (19 years old) from the Ta Oy ethnic group<sup>iv</sup> from Savannakhet Province. The family's land was leased out for private sector investment by the government. The change from working on one's own land to hired mobile workforce is something that appears in many ethnic minority households in the region of Savannakhet. A large part of young women have moved away to work in neighboring countries and some have gone to work in factories in Vientiane. In some families, such as in the case of Oom (18 years old) from the Kammu ethnic group in Ban Lak 20, there are problems with the land on which production went down when the plantation land was newly assigned by the government - because of the Thoen 2 Dam building project, villagers had to be evacuated from affected villages and resettled in her village. The agricultural land was newly allocated. For this reason, the villagers who had been there originally were affected because the agricultural land was divided and allocated to the newly arrived. This led to lower produce as well as lower income for the households. The land management by the government of Laos thus runs quite smoothly because legal regulations by the government are absolute and, consequently, the fact that the people's land is "being planned" is something that cannot be challenged. When land is leased out or returned, land is assigned in exchange and after the new mechanism era the change of the basic public utility structure and investment opportunities with leases of land to foreign entities in several projects have led to new land allocations in many areas. The effects on the life of people vary depending on the respective conditions in those areas.

**Point four:** Two out of the seven young women explained about the decision to work in the factory that work in the agricultural sector had characteristics that were not attractive for being a "modern woman". This can be seen in explanations like those by Nit (Kammu, 18 years) and Ann (Thai Daeng, 18 years) who do not like to go out into the sunlight because they don't want dark skin. Their view on beauty and the work they chose to do, are therefore another reason for the two of them to decide not to stay as workers in the agricultural sector and to enter the industrial sector instead. The attraction of industrial sector work in cities is transmitted via networks, both from relatives and friends. Both young women explained that this was a better choice from the perspectives of modernity, freedom, a wider society and the beauty they desired. The society in agriculture could, in their view, not provide this for them.

**Point five:** Factories are a chance for life. In this perspective, looking back to the basic culture of one's ethnic group with the idea that oneself is not desired in the community, is also a factor for the decision to leave the community and to work in a factory. This explanation was given by Duean, a young Khamu woman who is very thin. She told that at her age one should have already married in the Khamu society. However, nobody was interested in her because her physique is not

good in the context of the Khamu people. She does not appear strong and looks as if she could not work in the paddy fields, which is not desired by Khamu men. This was one reason that made her think that working in the industrial sector was a good choice for her since she did not have any professional skills, had terminated school after the fifth grade, could not speak Lao fluently and therefore there was not that much work for her to choose from. A factory seemed like the best choice. The fact that they cannot use the Lao Loum language very well, is another reason for limitations for work in other branches among women from ethnic minorities. Factory work can be done without the same necessity for communication in Lao as in work in the administrative or other labor fields.

**Point six:** The reproduction of thinking frames of being a woman in terms of responsibility for the family makes women go to work to look for an income to help families in the uncertainty seen in the agricultural sector. Mostly, if a family has daughters and sons, it can be seen that the sons can continue education on a higher level, for example in the case of Ann, who has a younger brother who is in upper secondary high school and an elder brother who studies at university. In some months she helps both with their expenses. With the belief that women are inferior to men in terms of abilities in education and chances after the completion of education, this is a main reason why working in a factory is more interesting than studying since they can start working without high educational qualifications (merely completion of the 5th grade is required). Thinking that studying does not make sense for women because they do not have the same abilities in education as men and men have more chances after completion of education to get good jobs, for example, to become government employees (and get a leading position) makes women stop studying by themselves and accept to go away to work and earn money for male members of their families because they see this as their duty.

These stories portray Laos' economic development policies, which originated in the new mechanism era. What is clearly shown is that the policies widely affect the population in various areas and reach beyond work related changes. They include the reproduction of patterns of responsibility for the family in their position as women, changes of agricultural methods towards monocultures, which cause changes in planting methods, lack of male work force in the agricultural sector, problems due to government projects on land management. Because of the various reasons above, the decision to work in factories taken by young ethnic minority women from other areas appeared in the development process of the country after the implementation of the new mechanism era policies.

### **Young women working in factories: Defining life under development policies to escape from poverty**

Research by the World Bank (2012) found that the number of Laotian women's work force from the countryside who flow into work places in cities and neighboring countries has been rising every year because of economic reasons, such as a decrease of agricultural land due to government policies, restrictions on natural resources, poverty, lack of work places, the unemployment rates in the countryside and the workers' low skills. This has resulted in an increasing influx of ethnic minority people into the cities and neighboring countries, where they look for work (UNDP Lao PDR: 2012-2015, 6-7). Being seen this way is an element of the division of work between nations that move industry to "third world" or "developing" countries so that they produce goods for the export to other countries. The wages for work force are low and female laborers are seen as more docile than men. This image is an incentive for investment in industrial factories (Grossman: 1979, 2). It is the same in Laos, with its characteristic low wages (in the factory chosen for the study, workers receive a basic salary of 629.000<sup>v</sup> Kip per month and a hourly payment of 5000 Kip per hour ) and little space for negotiations, particularly in terms of leave and accommodations (GDA: 2013, 67).

Another point to be mentioned is that being a young woman working in a factory is something that is associated with myths. At present, the term "Sao rong ngan" or "female factory workers" is given a negative connotation. This is different compared to the first period. Back then, when the factories emerged, it was explained that there was no negative feeling at all, when the young women working in factories were addressed because most of them came from communities within the capital Vientiane. They were therefore largely Lao Loum living in the city, children and grandchildren of people in the vicinities of factories. In the conditions of a society that was firmly associated with kinship and since the development of communication was still very limited, the lives of young women working in factories in the 1990s were not at all exciting according to statements by young female ex-factory workers from the the first period. And when they were asked about the term "Sao rong ngan", the ex-workers could immediately reply that if you looked back twenty years ago, the term was not negative as it is today.

As for today, however, being asked how they felt with the term "Sao rong ngan", all of the eight young women rather felt that it was a negative term. It is a term associated with disregard and they did not understand why they were seen "negatively".

At present, there are no people with a place of origin in the capital who work in factories. The female laborers are not seen as the same as the society of the capital Vientiane. Many areas around the factories with shops, entertainment places and beauty saloons have been created. The communities around the factories have appeared to respond to the purchasing power of the young women from the factories, for example saleswomen selling food, mobile market salesmen who come by the factory as well as various shopping spots in the capital Vientiane, for which the young women working in factories are seen as a source of income.

*“They spend a lot and dress well” (Wan: 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, 2016)*

This is a label with which young women working in factories are seen in a negative way, alleging that they would not save money and dressed fashionable and modern so that sometimes “Wan”, a food saleswoman in front of the factory complained to the researcher that most young women who work in the factory spend their money to dress up rather than to eat.

*“They say we are easy to deceive, drink beer and sleep with different people”*

*(Ann: 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016)*

Having a flirt, lover or partner can be considered an issue that is always interesting. However, mixing up with men can get negative in many cases dealing with gender issues. Statements from several people show that narrations about dating have turned into a “branding” of young factory employed women as easy to deceive and flirty.

*“They sleep somewhere else, sleep with their guys and stuff like that. There have already been guys beating up each other in front of the factory.” Wan (2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2016)*

The lady who sells rice and curry dishes talks about stories from the everyday life of “Kao”, a young Kammu woman, who accepts them herself, too. The narrations by Kao let you understand that the view on gender issues among ethnic minorities and the Lao Loum are different.

Kao’s case is one example. She is a young Khammu woman. Having sexual relations before marriage is not seen as an abnormal issue for her<sup>vi</sup>. When she moved to Vientiane, she still felt more free and that she could profit from “flirting”, and when she was happy, she decided to go out with men to date them as “lovers”. She found that her decision brought her benefits rather than any loss. However, from the perspective held by the Lao Loum in cities, these things are despicable social problems. The morality of gender issues among some ethnic groups conflict with the way of thinking about being a woman of the Lao Loum, who need to preserve their purity. They are therefore not seen as good women. Furthermore, the ethnic groups of all young female factory workers are seen collectively as having identical gender related behavior norms.

It can thus be seen that even though going to work in the industrial sector is seen as “modern” and “free”, it is also full of gender “bias” that is controlled in social structures, the women’s bodies and sexuality are exposed to particular attention (Rhode: 2010, 92-96) and in the case of the young female factory workers being seen in a generalized stereotype is also full of ethnic bias.

*“A beautiful woman should be white and thin” Ann (10th of January 2016)*

The perspectives on beauty in each ethnic group are different, for example, as in Kao’s case: The 19 year old young Kammu woman thinks that changing her shape was a thing that she should do because the Kammu like corpulent and strong looking women. This is different from Vientiane, where slim women are seen as nicer and that is why Kao tries to loose weight. It is different with Duean, the young Khammu woman who has a very slim shape about which she said has never been desirable among Kammu men. When she came to Vientiane, however, her slimness was seen as a good shape and many more young men came to flirt or talk to her than in her village. The same goes for Ann, the young Lao Phong woman. She found that the corpulent shape that her ethnicity considers nice, was not nice when she was in the city.

The concept of beauty as in the city can create confidence and shyness about body and face. Beauty, which is perceived differently in each ethnic group is transformed into a single concept: Making oneself “modern”. “Modern” beauty includes dressing well, white skin, being thin, nice hair, eating less and intermingling with society (e.g. drinking a lot). These ways of thinking about modernity are transmitted via informal networks of friends and relatives. Everyone considers issues of skin, shape and clothes like a form of contentedness with city life. Who possesses the beauty as

described here will not be looked down upon. It reduces characteristics like being "from the backwaters", "dark-skinned" or "fat", which is the image of people who work hard in the fields. "Beauty" is thus a construction that follows the social context. Beauty does not only have to do with "contentedness", with shape and face, but also with courting, which is of interest to young women who grow up. In the society of the young women who work in factories, courting is an exciting thing and there are many choices for them.

*"We are looked down upon as if we didn't know anything, as if we didn't have any knowledge. It really hurts to hear that" Oom (15th of March 2016)*

Three out of the seven women told that in the beginning they could not speak Lao very well. They could practice using the Lao language and get fluent while they were in the factory. Restrictions in the language are a reason why they cannot get access to higher education (besides the reason that men in the family are the ones chosen to study further) or get better work. That is why factories are a good starting point for learning to live and communicate in the city, because having a network of friends or relatives in factories is helpful in communication and practicing Lao Loum language.

This shows the local culture with its social pressure and that to women who leave their original society with skills, knowledge and language which are not that good, starting factory work with a social network can be helpful in the learning process to become "Lao work force" with an income. It, thus, means to create opportunities for oneself and to receive acceptance in one's original society as being daughters who "are able to work".

Two out of the eight women also send income for education to their younger or elder male siblings in their families. The income from factory work is seen as not insignificant in Laotian society and as something that does not require that many skills or education. That is why the women think that it is a good choice. This thinking concept shows the male dominated society in culture, which is at the root of development and this concept is deeply embedded and reproduced in the women themselves. Though Laos has had policies for the equality of women since 1991 (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry: 2010, 16) with drafting laws and actions to create equality between the genders, and though there is the Lao Women's Union and committees for progress among women, which operate starting from village level on issues concerning women so that they have the same rights as men, social processes still reproduce this way of thinking.

*"We are from the the same ethnic group. But they (her friends) do not speak ethnic minority languages – they speak only Lao" Ann (10th of January 2016)*

Besides presenting oneself as someone who looks modern like a city person, language is also something that changes among some people who do not accept to use the language of their ethnic group with friends from the same group. They use Lao Loum language because they have observed well that when you are Lao Loum you receive more acceptance compared to when you are from an ethnic minority within the city's society. They are seen as being different.

"Being Lao Loum" is given more social prestige as a citizen of Laos compared to being from an ethnic minority. Policies aimed at creating equality among all groups in Laos are, thus, still something weak. It is stipulated in law, but in actual practice being part of an ethnic minority still means encountering difficulties in terms of equality within social interactions, for example, with mocking language or use of derogative terms<sup>vii</sup>, claiming that they developed without understanding the way of life or making jokes of gender related issues among ethnic groups (Evans: 2006, 227-229).

The process of escaping from being a woman from one's own ethnic group, consequently, involves not speaking one's ethnic language or no reference to being part of any ethnic group; rather, one claims to be Lao Loum. Trying to dress modern and using dental braces is a presentation of oneself for "contentedness" with receiving social acceptance by the women themselves. It can be seen from these situations that between the structures and individuals there is a process of creating a structure under existing structures (Giddens & Pierson: 1998, 75-93). There are reproductions of structures, reproductions of people and acting as an agency, which will create and sustain structures. This is a relationship between individuals and social structures that cannot be separated because the individual on its own is the reproducer of the structure. Accepted institutions, regulations, customs, culture and morality become structures, which are held to and respected and even if they are not written down, they still remain in the deeply imbedded perception among individuals. Individuals or authorities are also an element in power in oneself that can be chosen to execute or reproduce. The individual's actions occurring day by day can create solid results from coercion. Idealistic thinking does not only result from being in the system of a large structure, for example, religion or nationalism, but it is also created from everyday

actions and speaking. Not to speak the language of an ethnic group is also a form of action that shows inequality of social structures from the own experiences by young women working in factories.

The term “Sao rong ngan”, thus, tells something about the government, capitalism and unequal development of cities and the countryside, including infrastructure and human resources development, particularly with regards to ethnic minority women. They live in frames of culture and society and define themselves as inferior to men in terms of opportunities in different areas. Ethnic minority women who stay in their original communities have to cope with being good daughters who have to help their families.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In the “new mechanism” era, policies were implemented to change the economy with an orientation towards the world market to attract capital and expertise from abroad, to end cooperative systems, to open the country so that foreign entities could invest, to create Free State enterprises and to reduce laws on investment to facilitate various economic activities. It can, thus, be believed that Laos tries to enter a stage of a new liberal administration while the socialist administration in line with the directive of “party and government” is still clearly adhered to. The flow of social development in Laos booms together with the development of economy and infrastructure. This causes changes among the population, including in hiring the work force, relocation and production for export. Human resources are, thus, seen as a work force investment with cheap costs following the thinking concept of dividing work between countries. Laos is seen as having a cheap female work force that can be controlled easily. The decision to go to work in factories is due to various reasons, and the desire to break from a more restricted agricultural life and enter a new “modern” and freer society of which all have to do with the development process of the country.

These stories portray Laos’ economic development policies, which originated in the new mechanism era. What is clearly shown is that the policies widely affect the population in various areas and reach beyond work related changes. The term “Sao rong ngan” (young woman who works in a factory) for the large number of ethnic minority women from the countryside, who go to work in factories in Laos is a designation that is defined in a negative sense. It shows that government policies and new liberal capitalism lead to inequalities in the development of cities compared to the countryside, including infrastructure and human resources development. With those stories, the past development processes of Laos, a country classified as a country of the lower-middle-income economies must be looked at from the perspective of the people’s changing lifestyles. In the struggles of ethnic minority women who go to work in cities, they also face issues related to customs of city people and the Lao Loum culture, which is the main culture there. They are labelled as easy going in terms of gender issues in the perspective of men. The decision to present oneself, which can be seen as a construction of “Beauty” as “modernity” is seen as a chance for those young women to establish contentedness for themselves in their life in the city. However, on the other side, among people in the city, they are represented in a wholistic stereotypical manner that involves gender related issues as in the cultures of ethnic groups, which conflict with being “a good woman according to Lao Loum in the city”. Being Lao Loum vs. being from an ethnic minority is not considered to be of equal value. The term “Sao rong ngan” thus shows a path that is both an opportunity and a struggle in the lives of women from Lao’s countryside involving the interpretation of representation in the development process.

Ethnic minority women live in frames of culture and society and define themselves as inferior to men in terms of opportunities in different areas. Ethnic minority women who stay in their original communities have to cope with being good daughters who have to help their families. In the struggles of ethnic minority women who go to work in cities they also face issues related to customs of city people and the Lao Loum culture, which is the main culture there. They are labelled as easy going in terms of gender issues in the perspective of men. The decision to present oneself, which can be seen as a construction of “modernity” is seen as a chance for those young women to establish contentedness for themselves in their life in the city. However, on the other side, among people in the city, they are represented in a wholistic stereotypical manner that involves gender related issues as in the cultures of ethnic groups, which conflict with being “a good woman according to Lao Loum in the city”. Being Lao Loum vs. being from an ethnic minority is not considered to be of equal value. The term “Sao rong ngan” thus shows a path that is both an opportunity and a struggle in the lives of women from Lao’s countryside involving the interpretation of representation in the development process that government policies and new liberal capitalism lead to inequalities in the development of cities compared to the countryside, including infrastructure and human resources development.



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<sup>i</sup> This piece of writing is a part of the research Disposition of Women Workers in the Development Process in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

<sup>ii</sup> Tai Daeng: An ethnic group of the Tai-Kadai language group with a population of approximately 25,000 people spread over Hua Phan, Luang Phrabang, Chiang Khwang, Luang Nam Tha, Udom Chai, Phong Sali, Vientiane and Bolikhamxai (Schlirsinger: 2003 Vol3, 135)

<sup>iii</sup> Khammu: An ethnic group in the Mon-Khmer language group with a population of 500,957 people spread over Borikhamxai, Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, Chaiyabuli, Bo Kaeo, Luang Nam Tha, Phong Sali, Hua Phan and Chiang Khwang (Schlirsinger: 2003 Vol2, 150)

<sup>iv</sup> Ta-oi: An ethnic group in the Mon-Khmer language group in Savannakhet, Salawan, Sekong and Champasak (Schlirsinger: 2003 Vol3, 87)

<sup>v</sup> 8124KIP Per 1 US Dollar

<sup>vi</sup> Having sexual relations before marriage is considered normal among the Kammu and negotiations about giving dowry for pregnant brides is something that appears constantly (Schlirsinger: 2003 vol3, 154)

<sup>vii</sup> For example calling the Kammu "Kha" or "Kha Khamu" among Lao Loum, which means slaves or servants who are poorer than Lao Loum (Schlirsinger: 2003 Vol3, 154)