

Rural-to-Urban Migrations and the Return of Migrants Back Home: A Case Study of Return Migrants from Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand¹

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Abstract

Rural-to-urban migration is a common occurrence in Northeastern Thailand, the region also known as “Isan.” Isan rural villagers, after finishing the rice harvest, regularly migrate to urban areas in Thailand or overseas to seek jobs and additional sources of income. Seasonal migration is a common strategy used by Isan young women to make a living. When they reach middle age, however, women migrants often choose to return to their homes in rural villages to live with their families. This paper examines the experiences of ten Isan rural-to-urban female migrants. These women present their experiences of migration and explain the effects of migration on their identities, values, worldviews and gender roles. They finished primary school and were single and young when they first migrated to urban areas to be factory workers. However, after they had children and reached middle age, most decided to return home to rural areas where they made a living. Therefore, rural-to-urban migration is a livelihood strategy adopted by young Isan women to seek better lives. Because factory workers earn higher incomes than those working in agriculture, woman migrants can send remittances to their families in rural areas which can be used to renovate houses and buy additional pieces of land as well as daily life necessities. Therefore, rural-to-urban migrations allow these women to fulfill their gender roles as dutiful daughters, good wives and responsible mothers in accordance with social expectations of women’s gender roles in traditional society. Moreover, rural-to-urban migration allows these migrants to have cosmopolitan experiences and develop new skills. After having learned how to manage their capital, time, knowledge and social networks, they

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can apply these skills to transform themselves into small rural entrepreneurs when they re-settle at home in rural areas.

Keywords: rural-to-urban migration, women, return migrants, Northeastern Thailand, entrepreneur

บทคัดย่อ

การอพยพจากชนบทสู่เมืองเป็นปรากฏการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นเป็นปกติในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของไทย ดังที่พบว่าหลังจากการเก็บเกี่ยวข้าวแล้ว ชาวบ้านในชนบทอีสานจะอพยพเข้าเมืองใหญ่หรือไม่ก็ไปทำงานในต่างประเทศเพื่อหารายได้เพิ่ม การอพยพย้ายถิ่นตามฤดูกาลจึงเป็นกลยุทธ์ที่คนหนุ่มสาวใช้เพื่อสร้างชีวิตของตนเอง อย่างไรก็ตาม เมื่อผู้อพยพมีอายุย่างเข้าวัยกลางคน พวกเขามักจะเลือกอพยพคืนถิ่นในชนบทเพื่อสร้างครอบครัวของตนเอง บทความนี้เป็นการอธิบายถึงประสบการณ์การอพยพย้ายถิ่นของผู้อพยพเพศหญิงจากภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของไทย ผู้อพยพหญิงคืนถิ่นเหล่านี้อธิบายถึงประสบการณ์ของการอพยพย้ายถิ่น และสำรวจนัยสำคัญของการอพยพย้ายถิ่นที่มีต่ออัตลักษณ์ คุณค่า โลกทัศน์ ตำแหน่งแห่งที่ทางสังคม และความสัมพันธ์ทางเพศ การวิจัยพบว่า ผู้อพยพหญิงส่วนใหญ่สำเร็จการศึกษาระดับมัธยมศึกษาตอนต้น พวกเธอตัดสินใจอพยพไปทำงานต่างถิ่นในวัยที่ยังโสดและอายุน้อย เพื่อหาประสบการณ์ชีวิตและแสวงหาแหล่งรายได้ที่ดีกว่างานในภาคเกษตร พวกเธอนิยมไปทำงานในโรงงานอุตสาหกรรม อย่างไรก็ตาม เมื่อพวกเธอแต่งงานสร้างครอบครัวและมีลูกและย่างเข้าวัยกลางคน พวกเธอส่วนใหญ่เลือกที่จะกลับมาสร้างครอบครัวที่ชนบทอีสาน การอพยพจากชนบทสู่เมืองจึงเป็นกลยุทธ์ในการดำรงชีพของผู้หญิงชนบทอีสาน ที่ช่วยให้พวกเธอยังคงแสดงบทบาทของลูกสาว ผู้กตัญญู ภรรยาที่ดี และแม่ผู้รับผิดชอบ ตามความคาดหวังของสังคมจารีตประเพณีที่คาดหวังให้ผู้หญิงกตัญญูเลี้ยงดูพ่อแม่ให้สุขสบาย เนื่องจากงานในภาคอุตสาหกรรมมีรายได้ดีกว่างานในภาคเกษตร พวกเธอจึงสามารถส่งเงินกลับมาให้ครอบครัวใช้ซ่อมแซมบ้าน ซื้อที่ดิน และใช้จ่ายในชีวิตประจำวัน ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น การอพยพไปทำงานต่างถิ่นยังทำให้ผู้หญิงชนบทมีประสบการณ์ในการเห็นโลกกว้างและมีทักษะในการทำงานมากขึ้น ดังนั้นพวกเธอจึงเรียนรู้เรื่องการบริหารจัดการเงินเวลาและเครือข่ายทางสังคม ซึ่งทำให้พวกเธอสามารถนำความรู้และประสบการณ์ใหม่ๆ มาใช้เมื่ออพยพคืนถิ่น และกลายเป็นผู้ประกอบการที่ประสบความสำเร็จได้

คำสำคัญ: การอพยพจากชนบทสู่เมือง ผู้หญิง ผู้อพยพคืนถิ่น ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย ผู้ประกอบการ

Introduction

Isan rural villages have changed significantly in recent decades as a result of rapid development towards modernization. Therefore, female migrants who return home have to adjust to changing social and environmental conditions and search for their own livelihood strategies to survive in the new environment.

This paper is based on qualitative research and fieldwork conducted in Ubon Ratchathani province in 2013. The research examines life histories presented through ten case studies of women who had at least one experience of rural-to-urban migration and later returned home to live with their families in rural and semi-urban areas of Ubon Ratchathani province. These women all came from agricultural households and graduated from primary and secondary schools. They migrated out from rural villages to Bangkok and other places in Central Thailand after finishing their education. At the time of migration, all key informants were young and single. Their ages ranged from the teens to the early twenties when they first migrated to Central Thailand to work in factories. However, after they had families, they decided to return to their homes, where they used the knowledge and skills they had acquired as migrant laborers to start their own business.

Rural-to-urban migration has become a concern of scholars both inside and outside of Thailand. Most studies of migration have been concerned primarily with its macro-level demographic, economic and social effects (Ashakul, n.d.; Archavanitjakul, 2000; Punpung, 2000). Relatively few scholars have focused on the experiences of migration as perceived by the migrants themselves (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004: 1-40; Ruanmoon, 2007). Moreover, even fewer scholars have focused on the circumstances of rural-to-urban migrants or examined the impact of gender on the experiences of migration (Ruanmoon, 2007; Fan, 2004: 177-204).

Some studies indicate that experiences of rural-to-urban migration have had impacts on individuals' worldviews, sense of identity, and social relations (Punpung, 2000; Mills, 2001; Fan, 2004). This finding is particularly significant in the case of rural women's migration for a number of reasons.

First, migration is used by some women as a way of escaping gender oppression or domestic violence. For example, a study by Sureepon Panpung (2000) indicates that migrant women from the Shan State of Myanmar working as domestic servants in Chiang Mai, Thailand had previously experienced domestic violence and gender oppression. Some also fled political conflict and violence in Myanmar to seek more independence and higher incomes in Thailand. Yet, because of their status as illegal migrants and women, they were vulnerable to exploitation and violence. For example, they were threatened with arrest, or jailed and repatriated, and they were under the control of their employers. Moreover, they had health problems and lacked knowledge about general health, reproductive health and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Many confronted domestic violence (Panpung, 2000).

Second, migration allows women to become more independent and it may provide them freedom to make decisions about their earned wages, sexuality and reproduction. A study by Aihwa Ong (1987) indicates that young Malaysian village women prefer factory work to agricultural work because it pays higher wages. Moreover, they can decide how to spend the wages by themselves. Importantly, young migrant women feel that factory work provides them with autonomy and the ability to negotiate with male authority figures such as fathers and brothers at home. Since the wages earned from export-led industry are higher than those earned from agriculture, young women who are major contributors to their families can negotiate with them concerning sexuality in such matters as delayed marriage and the autonomy to control their sexual image and sexual orientation. The change from an agrarian society to industrialization has created changing patterns of domestic relationships in Malay villages. As villages' families are more

likely to depend on the earned wages of daughters than on those of sons, young migrant women cooperating with their mothers can gain more control over domestic relationships. Consequently, fathers are likely to lose control over their daughters in terms of gender and sexuality.

Finally, because of migration, young rural women can respond to their families' and communities' expectations that they will be 'dutiful daughters.' If they migrate to the city to earn more money, they can send remittances home that can be used to improve their families' lives. For example, a study by Ruanmoon (2007) explores the experiences of Shan migrant women from Myanmar working in wet markets in Chiang Mai province. Ruanmoon finds that gender plays a critical role in positioning identities and determining the experiences of migrant women. In Myanmar, young migrant women are also expected to be dutiful daughters-daughters who are grateful and work hard to send remittances back home to improve their families' lives. Moreover, Burmese migrant women consider cross-border migration as a way of escaping violence in Myanmar and a way to make more money to improve their lives. While most studies consider Burmese migrant women as victims, ignoring their role active agents, Ruanmoon explores the agency of these women who have their own will. They are rational and they decide for themselves. Their decisions are closely linked to their gender roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Young, single migrant women are flexible. They are good workers and dutiful daughters because they are more independent and they are likely to cope better with hard work and long working hours. By contrast, migrant women who are wives and mothers have less flexibility. They have double burdens, and their gender roles contradict their identities. If they work too much, they cannot be good wives and mothers; and if they are good wives and mothers, they cannot be flexible employees who can respond to the demands of their employers. For this reason, migrant women who are wives and mothers have more serious problems than those who are young and single. They often suffer from anxiety about dismissal and divorce because they cannot respond to the expectations of both their employers and families.

Similar to the study of Ruanmoon (2007), Mills (2001) shows that Isan migrant women are dutiful daughters who use rural-to-urban migration to earn better incomes and to improve their families' lives. Mills finds that these migrants prefer working in factories because they are motivated to consume modernity and to have higher incomes to help their families. They prefer factory jobs as they can earn more money this way. Moreover, factory workers are more independent, since they have more autonomy to make decisions about their earned wages, sexuality and reproduction. Yet, Mills argues that these women are expected to return home, and to marry in the countryside while in their early twenties. After marriage, Isan migrant women are expected to be responsible for all activities in the domestic sphere.

Locating Rural-to-Urban Migrations in Isan Migrant Women's Experiences

This paper relates the rural-to-urban migration experiences of women in Ubon Ratchathani province from interviews conducted in 2013. Historically, the flood of migrations of young rural women to Bangkok is the result of the industrialization boom in Thailand since the late 1980s. The development of export-oriented industries in Central Thailand required a large number of female laborers to work in industries such as textiles, electronics, food processing, etc. The demand for female labor in the industrial sector opened wider opportunities for women to migrate out of rural areas to work in urban areas and big cities (Mills, 2001). This demand is a key element in the growth of industrialization in Thailand, the circumstance of "feminization of production," that is, the use of female laborers to support industrial production and to create a surplus, which became a national agenda. Peter Bell (1996: 55-82) argues that intensive use of Isan migrant laborers in the industrial sector created a huge surplus in the Thai economy during the 1980s to the 1990s. Apart from the feminization of production, the growth of capitalism in Thailand also depends heavily on the "feminization of consumption" or the way in which capitalism turns women into

consumers of industrial products. The feminization of consumption stimulates the growth of industrialization and finally creates a greater surplus.

Since Isan women have experienced rural-to-urban migration for more than two decades, migrant women are not considered "aliens" by their neighbors. Young women who decide to migrate out to work in Central Thailand do not face the strong opposition by their families that some family members experienced migration in the past. Most migrant women follow their siblings, friends and neighbors who have already worked in Central Thailand. They prefer working in the same places with their siblings, friends and neighbors. Relatively few women search for jobs by themselves or decide to work in places where they do not know anyone. This situation indicates that social networks and trust are important factors in determining potential migration for young women from rural Isan. For these women, the possibility of getting a job at the same workplaces of their friends, siblings and neighbors is a major incentive for their migrations.

Interestingly, most migrant women specify that they prefer factory work to other jobs, such as domestic servants, the service sector or the sex industry because of the relatively high wages paid in the industrial sector. They do not consider the hard work, long hours, and discipline of workplaces to be problems in exchange for satisfactory wages. Thus, their perceptions of factory work are relatively positive, while their perceptions of other jobs such as domestic servants, service sectors, and sex workers are negative. They regard such jobs as dehumanizing and devalued by society. My study supports Mills (2001) in her point that factory work is viewed positively by migrants since it is associated with modern, rational, reliable jobs. According to Mills, migrant women prefer factory work because they want to be a part of modernized production and they want to consume modernity in the big cities. Moreover, migrant women expect to earn reliable incomes. They want to ensure that their incomes are predictable and reliable so that they can pay their bills in the cities, and regularly send remittances home.

Most migrant women have experienced rural-to-urban migrations several times. It is common to find that they have worked in the cities for several years. They often return to their home in the countryside when their families ask for help in the domestic sphere, and then migrate out to the cities again when someone else takes responsibility at home and their help is no longer needed. Many women who marry and become pregnant decide to return home to give birth, and then to migrate out to work in Central Thailand again when their babies reach the age of three to four months if their mother, sisters, or siblings can take care of them.

Female migrants who are young and single are more independent; they often change jobs if they find a new position that provides a better environment and higher wages. But those who are married and have young children are likely to stay in the same workplace. Most migrants earn approximately 7,000 to 10,000 baht per month (212 to 303 USD), excluding the wages earned from working overtime (OT). Young migrants generally spend more money on themselves, and thus send small remittances back home. Most married migrants, however, try to save money as much as possible so that they can send remittances home. Particularly, migrants who have young children at home usually send a large proportion of their earnings home. Their need for higher wages forces them to work harder and longer to gain a larger income. In this sense, different degrees of responsibility and different social ties to their families in the countryside are the forces of migration for Isan women. Yet, whatever the circumstances, rural-to-urban migrations allow these migrants to be able to sustain their traditional gender roles as dutiful daughters and mothers.

Although Mills (2001) found that young migrants are expected to return home, marry and assume domestic responsibility when they are in their early twenties, at my field site in 2013 few migrants decided to return home to marry, and no one decided to re-settle in the countryside after marriage. Although some migrants returned home to marry, they always migrated to the cities to work until they became pregnant. Some women returned home to give birth, but after staying at home a short

time, they again migrated to the cities to work. They often left their infants with their families in the countryside while they migrated to the urban areas to work in the factories.

Most return migrants perceived their rural-to-urban migration experiences positively, as they saw that migrations provided them with numerous benefits. They described the rural-to-urban migrations as a way to broaden their perspectives of the world, as a path to undergo new experiences which they had never known when they were farmers in the countryside. The return migrants said that migrations allowed them to meet more people, learn to speak, and know how to negotiate with people and deal with complicated issues. Importantly, they had been trained to work in factories which had many rules and regulations. Most migrants said these jobs provided not only money but also good time-management skills. They felt that all the experiences and knowledge obtained from rural-to-urban migrations were useful in their lives when they returned home to start up their businesses.

Experiences of Rural-to-Urban Migrations from the Point of View of Return Migrants

Many return migrants adapted the experience and knowledge derived from the rural-to-urban migrations to start their businesses and become small-scale entrepreneurs after resettling in the rural areas and semi-urban areas of Ubon Ratchathani province. Excerpts from the case studies below provide some insight into the perspectives and experiences of rural-to-urban migrations from the point of views of return migrants.

The interviews with ten return migrants show their positive perceptions of migrations. Return migrant women viewed rural-to-urban migrations provide them a good many opportunities, including accumulating capital, acquiring new knowledge and skills, meeting new people and having new experiences, all of which can be used in start their business and become successful small-scale entrepreneurs.

The first case study is “Buntom” (Buntom [Pseudonym], 2013). Buntom is a 32 year-old migrant woman who worked in many places,

including a hospital, a hotel and a factory in Bangkok for many years. She said that she had many valuable experiences from migrations. For example, she became more independent and more mature, and learned to be more patient and to adjust to changing situations and environments.

After returning home, Buntom did various kinds of work. After engaging in rice farming and investing in being a food street vender, she eventually became the owner of an internet café and copy shop. She said that she completed a computer science program, and learned how to repair computers. Consequently, she makes her living by applying both her knowledge of computers and the experience gained from migrations, which have made her more self-confident. She said that learning about financial management skills has made her more familiar with becoming an entrepreneur and that she no longer wants to be someone's employee, but rather an employer. Nowadays, she has enough income from her business, which provides her with the opportunity to stay at home and take responsibility for her family and young daughters. She represents a return woman migrant who has become a successful small-scale entrepreneur.

"Wannadee," (Wannadee [Pseudonym], 2013) aged 33, began working in a shoe factory in Bangkok when she was 15 years old. But because of an allergy, after a year of working in the factory, she was unable to continue working there. However, she soon found a job in a clothing factory where she met the man who eventually became her husband. In the new factory, she earned about 135 baht (or about 4 USD) per day, excluding overtime pay of approximately 30 baht (or about one USD) per day. When Wannadee became pregnant in 1998, her husband was laid off from the factory because of the economic depression and so her family decided to return home in the hope of reducing their living costs. Moreover, she wanted to give birth to her first daughter at home. After returning home, her husband became a taxi driver while she grew vegetables for consumption and sale. From selling home-grown vegetables she earned about 100-200 THB (or about 3-5 USD) per day, which she said was enough to cover living costs at home.

Subsequently, her husband secured a bank loan which he used to rent a manual petrol pump station from their neighbors. Then the couple become entrepreneurs. Wannadee began her own business as the owner of a grocery shop in a peri-urban village. At the same time, she got a part-time job as a street food vender. She used the extra income from the latter job to invest in her own grocery shop. When the shop became successful, her husband bought a new van to rent out. He earned enough money from renting the van, including his wages as a driver, to pay back the bank loan. Shortly after buying the van, her family bought a new truck, which they used to carry goods they bought from the department stores in the city to sell in their grocery shop.

Wannadee's family is representative of the return women migrants who become successful entrepreneurs after returning home. The main reasons for their success are their work ethic and their good management of capital and savings. But Wannadee herself insisted that she would not have been able to run a business if she had never migrated out of the village to be a factory worker in Bangkok. Because of rural-to-urban migration, her worldview about work and life has changed considerably, as she does not want to be someone else's employee. Instead, she wants to be a successful entrepreneur and this is the reason she took the risk of going into business. She used the capital, skills, knowledge, experience and social networking gained from being migrant laborer to become a rural entrepreneur.

The case of "Suwan," (Suwan [Pseudonym], 2013) 47, is similar. She had worked in an export-oriented clothing factory in Bangkok in 1987 as a packer for about 200 THB (about 5 USD) per day. Her job was very demanding but she worked every day, including holidays, to earn as much as possible because she wanted to send remittances back home to support her sisters' education and to help her aging parents. After five years of this work, she became seriously ill from an allergy. She decided to marry her boyfriend, stop working in the factory and start her own business.

Suwan became a small entrepreneur in 1991 when she decided to be a food street vender, selling *som tam* (papaya salad) in front of the

factories in Samut Prakarn province. The income from selling *som tam* was more than 10,000 baht per month while her husband earned an additional 10,000 baht per month working in a company. They stayed in Central Thailand almost ten years before leaving the city to return home. Suwan said that the reason for migrating back to the rural area was that her sister had finished her education and her father and mother were elderly.

At home, her husband became a taxi driver, and Suwan began her own made-to-order food shop at home. She used the knowledge about cooking and food street vender obtained from the migration to run her food shop at home. Nowadays, she is a successful entrepreneur, and she has a positive perspective on migration. "Without the experience of migration and working far away from home, I couldn't be who I am today," she said. She has learned many new things from migration and working in the cities and has greater confidence and self-esteem. "If I had never out-migrated to other regions and never worked in a factory," she said, "I wouldn't know how to deal with people, how to make decisions, or how to invest. But, because I travelled, I learned how to negotiate with people and to manage time and money. Now I can adapt this knowledge and experience to make my way at home."

Another example is "Yayoo," (Yayoo, [Pseudonym], 2013) 30, a woman from Udon Thani province, who has worked in several different factories since she was 15 years old. She first worked in a stainless steel plant in Bangkok for three years where she earned about 180 THB (or about 5 USD) per day. She said that thus was enough to cover her living costs in Bangkok, but she had very little savings. After marrying a man from Ubon Ratchathani who worked in the same factory, she became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. Yayoo left her daughter at a nursery when she went to work and picked her up after work. Later, she got a job in a jewelry factory, where she earned approximately 8,000 baht (or about 228 USD) per month, which was more than what she made working in the previous factory. However, her husband decided to stop working in the factory in Bangkok and returned home in Ubon Ratchathani province to help his mother begin a new business, renting out rooms in a dormitory.

Later, Yayoo followed her husband and began working part-time in a food shop at Ubon Ratchathani University. She earned about 150 baht (or about 4 USD) per day, which she said was not enough to cover her living costs so she moved to work in a café within the university, where she earned more money. When she became pregnant for the second time, she stopped working to give birth to her son. After that, she had no job, so she decided to start a new business of her own. She asked for a loan from her mother-in-law and used these funds to rent a room to set up a new coffee shop near the university. With the experience that she had acquired when she was a migrant laborer and the knowledge acquired when she worked in the café, she was able to run her own business. By selling coffee and soft drinks, she makes approximately 1,000 (or about 28 USD) or more per day.

Yayoo feels that migration was a good experience for her, since it provided her with new opportunities and experiences. Moreover, she learned how to deal with people so that she became more confident in herself. With the knowledge she acquired from working in a café, she could manage the capital, skills, knowledge, experience and social networking necessary to start her own coffee shop. She was also able to repay the loan and has become a new rural entrepreneur.

"Nusaloo," (Nusaloo [Pseudonym], 2013), another key informant, at 37 is a return migrant woman who worked in a factory in Samut Prakarn province for almost five years. She earned about 12,000 baht per month, excluding extra wages from working overtime. After marrying a man who worked in another factory, she gave birth to a son whom she left with her mother in Ubon Ratchathani province when she migrated back to work in the factory. However, on one of her home visits, she was sad to see how hard her elderly father had to work alone in the paddy field so she decided to migrate back home and take responsibility for her family by working in agriculture.

After resettling down in a peri-urban village of Ubon Ratchathani in 1998, Nusaloo turned to rice farming. In 2009 she earned approximately 8,000 baht per year from selling rice, which was not enough to live on and therefore she began to work as a merchant. She

bought fish from fish ponds and sold it to traders in a wet market. She earned almost 10,000 baht per year from this activity. Her husband also earned several thousand baht per year from rice harvesting as he worked as a wage laborer in the paddy fields of others in another district. She said that she then had enough money to pay the bills, but she needed more money to renovate her house, and so in 2013, she grew cassava for sale on four rai of her own land. Later she rented an additional ten rai of land to grow cassava. She used the skills obtained from being a wage laborer in her neighbor's cassava plot to manage her own cassava plots to gain extra income.

Nusaloo said that her experiences from rural-to-urban migration had changed her personality and increased her level of competence. For example, she learned how to negotiate with people. When she was young, she was very shy and she did not know how to talk to people, but today she is self-confident and can make her own decisions regarding her job, her life and her family. As a consequence, she was able to start her own businesses.

The last return woman migrant is "Som," (Klaithong [Pseudonym], 2013), a 40-year-old return woman migrant. Klaithong migrated to work when she was 17 years old after finishing secondary school in her hometown. She worked in various factories: making clothing, processing chicken and other kinds of food, manufacturing detergent, etc. She earned about 6,000 to 8,000 baht per month, excluding income derived from working overtime. She married a factory worker she had met at the same workplace, and after becoming pregnant, returned home in Isan to give birth to her daughter. Then, the couple migrated back to work in the same factory. Klaithong regularly sent remittances of 4,000 baht home every month to support her family and to pay for her daughter's expenses. After becoming pregnant with her second child, she returned home to give birth. Once again she left the baby with her mother and migrated back to work as a factory worker in Central Thailand for six months. Subsequently her mother called her to return home and gave her a sizeable amount of money that she had

obtained from selling a large plot of land to run her own business at home.

Klaithong's perception of rural-to-urban migration is very positive. She views factory work as a good job which helped her to earn more than from working in agriculture. Moreover, she preferred working in the factory because of the reliable wages she earned, which enabled her to send remittances back home regularly to support her family. She said that working in the factory has changed her worldview and her attitude about work and time. Since she was trained to be hard working and disciplined in the factory, she learned many skills such as financial capital management, time planning and people management. After returning home, she uses these skills to run her own business. With the money that her mother gave her she bought a new rice-harvesting machine and now provides rice harvesting services for farmers in her village, earning 600 baht per rai. This has become her new occupation and through it she earns enough money for her family's living.

These ten interviews reveal that women who decided to migrate out to big cities came from families with low incomes. They had a relatively low level of education and few options to work in the rural areas. Thus, they view the rural-to-urban migrations as alternative careers. Moreover, they regard factory wage labor as a better option than agricultural work as it generates higher wages. Additionally, they feel that working in a factory allowed them to learn more skills, have new experiences and meet more people. In particular, they learned how to manage knowledge, capital and time to survive in the cities. Thus, these women were able to utilize the knowledge and skills obtained from being migrant laborers to restructure their lives when they returned home to Isan rural areas. Each of them feels that rural-to-urban migration has made them a new woman. Because of their experiences of migrant labors, they have new perspectives on life as well as self-confidence. They are able to think, make decisions, take risks and start new businesses. As a result, these migrants have transformed themselves into new rural entrepreneurs and they are able to adjust to conditions to survive in the changing context of Northeastern Thailand.

Conclusion

By focusing on the experiences of return woman migrants from Ubon Ratchathani province, this paper finds that gender is a key force of migration among young Isan women. These women want to follow their traditional gender roles since Northeastern culture expects women to be dutiful daughters and responsible wives and mothers. The discourse of gender in Thai society insists that, since women cannot be ordained as men can, they should be dutiful daughters who pay respect to their families and show gratitude to their parents their entire lives (Kirsch, 1982). Consequently, Isan female migrants try to be dutiful daughters by working hard and sending remittances back home to help their families. Nevertheless, women have different perspectives about their gender roles and their responsibilities to their families depending on their age and marital status. While single young female migrants behave as good daughters, they are relatively independent. They can work far away from home for many years. In the past, Isan female migrants decided to return home when they had a child. But nowadays, after going home to give birth, they soon migrate back to the cities to work and leave their babies with their parents. On the one hand, the change in their decisions shows the increasing burdens of Isan woman migrants, as women have to work harder and longer in the cities to show their gratitude to their parents as dutiful daughters and responsible mothers. On the other hand, by migrating to cities, they are able to maintain these gender roles in response to the social expectations in traditional society. Moreover, rural-to-urban migration allows them to witness modern, cosmopolitan lifestyles, meet more people and acquire new skills. By learning how to manage capital, time, knowledge and social networking, they can apply the knowledge and skills gained while being migrant laborers in the cities to become successful small rural entrepreneurs after re-settling back at home.

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Interview

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