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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From "Domestic" to "Public" Spaces: Transformation of Rural Isan Women Prior to Joining the Social Movement Resisting State Policies in Northeastern Thailand between 1950-1990

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the studies of "rural women" in northeastern Thailand, or vernacularly called "Isan." I focus on the rural women's histories before they engage in the social movements resisting dam construction projects. Dams were large-scale development projects launched by the central government as part of their expanding power to control natural resources in other regions between 1950 and 1990. This article aims to understand the rural Isan women's transformation in the context of changing economic, social, and political structures. It further seeks to identify the factors that influenced women to participate in the resistance movement. The study reviews a collection of historical records, comprising research reports, academic articles, newsletters, newspapers, and any relevant document that records the stories of "rural Isan women." I employ gender as an analytical concept to guide my understanding of the negotiation processes and their transformation. The research reveals that two key factors significantly influence the decisions of women. First, modern "Isan women" connect their "domestic" and "public" spheres via the market. Second, the women have taken on a new role as the "medium," bridging the local market within their communities to external markets or coordinating among various types of traders through "networks". Emigrating from their local communities to work to earn income to "care" for their families enabled them to encounter modernity and gain new experiences, knowledge, and skills, especially negotiation. These encounters encouraged the rural Isan women to feel confident enough to participate in the resistance movement against dam construction.

INTRODUCTION

"Rural Isan Women" are women who live in northeastern Thailand, where the country shares borders with Laos and Cambodia. The majority of "Rural Isan Women" belong to the Thai-Lao ethnic group, with their lives intricately entwined with religious, moral, and customary practices. Buddhist-based cultural norms predetermine women as caretakers of their sons, a vital contribution to nurturing Buddhism (Keyes, 1984: 227). Community traditions and customs further "push" and "set norms" to determine Isan people's behaviors through three institutions: seniority, temples, monkhood, and families (Chamratphan et al., 1993: 40). Monks at Buddhist temples become the experts who can set rules to retain cultural norms. Families uphold cultural practices that instruct both men and women on how to live and obey their parents. These institutions attach "rural Isan women" with the

responsibilities of caring for their families and continuing the rituals to safeguard the pillar institutions of their communities. Women, thus, continually are taught and reminded that their identities depend on their husbands. This belief becomes a common saying that "women depend on men like lightless stars or the moon that depend on the sun to shine" (Phurisinsit, 2000: 140-141).

Most "rural Isan women" dwell in their homes (baan), or "domestic" space. Their appearances were inconspicuous in "public" (satharana) spaces, particularly in political ones. Advocacy and policy negotiation become the spaces where "men" shine. Take the Farmers Federation of Thailand (FFT), for example. Founded in 1974, most, if not all, of the founding members were men from all regions of Thailand who traveled to the capital Bangkok to voice their struggles (Keawthep, 1983: 18). Later, the Thai government launched a brutal attack on them. Thapchumpon and Sabsomboon (1999: 155–160) recorded that all 46 assassinated FFT leaders were men. Another example is the 'Small Scale Farmer' Assembly of Isan, formed by farmers who were detrimentally financially affected by the record low pricing of cassava, pork, and cashew nuts. The group started small, then later expanded as a movement of farmers who were affected by national policies between 1993-1995 (Phattharathananauth, 2006: 86; Yaikaew et al., 2024). Like the FFT, men were the leading advocates who negotiated and appeared in media and public spaces. Media and academics would interview men first, perceiving them as the leaders of the social movement. The rare mention of women's names or roles further limited the focus of social movement research to men's views and perspectives.

By 1997, "rural Isan women" reemerged on the front page of state newspapers and mainstream media as protest leaders against state development projects. The front page of the Matichon newspaper on 31 January 2003 featured a quote from Sompong Wiangchan, a prominent female leader who has been one of the key negotiators with the state, "The Assembly of the Poor returned, announced they had not lost, condemned "Samak" immoral." Another headline by the Kom Chad Luek newspaper, dated 17 May 2007, wrote, "Yai Hai's Wish Came True After 27 Years. Gov't Returned the Land, Ordered Dam Discharge." On March 29, 2006, the front page of the Kom Chad Luek newspaper featured Sa-ing Tawaisin, a female leader of the Caravan of the Poor. As a result, academics became interested in "rural Isan women" as the primary actors in social movements.

Recordings of "rural Isan women" began after 1987 when the protests against state development projects gained momentum, such as the Land Distribution Program for the Poor Living in Degraded Forests (vernacularly known as the Khor Jor Kor scheme) and dams on the Mun River such as the Pak Mun hydroelectric dam and the Rasi Salai dam. Immediate impacts were exacerbating land conflicts as villagers were resettled to state designated land, where soil quality was too poor for farming or on land with existing communities. Notable research on rural Isan women included Kothawinont (2000)'s "Women in the Marginal People's Movement: A Case Study of Mae Mun Man Yuen Community Two and Three at Rasi Salai Dam," Vijitalongkorn (2006)'s "The Struggle of the Northeastern (Isan) Women: A Case Study of Elder Hai Khachandra," Ninnanon (2008)'s "Women' Roles in Lamdom Yai Dam Project Movement at Najaluay District, Ubon Ratchathani Province," and Sittirak (1998)'s "Forest Women: Stories of Grassroot Women in Thailand's Environmental Movement." All four studies were published after 1998 and similarly illustrated the roles of "rural Isan women" as the guardians of natural "heritage" of their families and protestors against dam development projects (Kothawinont, 2000: 62).

The four studies similarly concluded that "rural Isan women" who engaged in the protests had more acceptance in "public" spaces upon returning to their rural communities and families (Ninnanont, 2008: 4). The conclusion highlighted the disappearing natural resources, vital to their livelihoods, prompting many poor young men and women to emigrate and seek employment elsewhere (Kothawinont, 2000: 67-65). Disappearing natural resources, they asserted, was a significant factor in transforming "rural Isan women" to become "leaders" within the negotiating body aimed at reclaiming appropriated natural resources from the state. However, this conclusion overlooked

many dimensions of women's life, especially their lived experiences, which they acquired by learning and transforming themselves with the dynamic social, economic, and political complexities of the Isan region.

This article aims to demonstrate “rural Isan women” as “historical agency” who have the power to decide to act or not to act. In this instance, their agency determines the decision to engage in the protest against dam development projects. The study examines gender to illustrate how women transformed during the changing social and cultural landscapes of the Isan region in the developmental period. The article emphasizes the life histories of “rural Isan women,” highlighting their living situations, attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs and how they shifted roles in tandem with the economic, social, and political changes. Despite having completed only Grade 4 education, “rural Isan women” gained knowledge through trading at the market or migrating for work, prior to being affected by various state development initiatives. This experience and learning process did not happen instantly but gradually accumulated through practice—from negotiating with the local market system to working far from home. Their lived experiences were significantly influenced their decision to participate in social movements, ultimately resulting in their emergence as “women leaders."

2. **Theoretical Framework**

Contemporary women's studies are increasingly more complex and dynamic than in the past. Western scholars previously argued that “women” could never be equal to men if they were limited to only remaining in “domestic” space and excluded from “public space” (Walby, 1997: 6). Restricting women to domestic space eliminates their access to power and recognition. When women eventually ascended to positions of power, people began to perceive them as either illegal or engaging in misconduct. Additionally, women's values were shaped and limited to only domestic spaces (Rosaldo and Lamphere,1974: 8). Nowadays, western academia pays more attention to gender diversity and inequality rooted in intersections of ages, classes, indigeneity, and geographies (Walby, 1997: 6).

In Southeast Asia, Errington (1990) illustrates the supportive relationships between men and women in their works with no distinct economic or ritual differences (. When comparing women in Southeast Asia and South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, it appears that the status of Southeast Asian women is more equal to that of men. As the families are both matrilineal and patrilineal, the children are related to both sides of the parents’ families. Often, women in Southeast Asia manage and control the family’s spending and financial records, as well as doing trading by herself. On the other hand, Indian and Western societies typically stem from patrilineal practices. IIn agrarian economies, husbands and wives share labor relatively equally, allowing them to participate in their partners' jobs (Wongthet, 2006: 7). However, Errington (1990: 4-5) noted that the gender differences may be more subtle. Certain practices may appear less significant to Westerners, but they are significant for local people.

“Gender” as an analytical concept pays close attention to the behaviors and cultural meanings assigned to the differences between women and men. These are the fundamental identities of human social life. Rather than being innate or biological, societal members socially construct gender and expect its observance and practice. These norms are related to and are constantly determined and controlled (Ibid: 315) by historical, social, political, and economic contexts. Markets and state interventions in local communities lead to a restructuring of resource management. This was both an opportunity and a limitation (Prompakping, 1999: 87; Nguyen, 2024). When local rural communities open up to the world, they enable themselves to interact with new economic structures. Rural laborers flow to urban systems, while urban products flow to rural areas. Households shift their economic status from solely a production unit to a product exchange unit with production activities (Ibid: 98).

This article uses the gender lens to illustrate the transformation of "rural Isan women" who participated in state dam construction resistance movements in relation to fluid economic, social, and cultural contexts. This article aims to highlight these women's capacity and agency to choose and change their ways of life both in domestic and public spaces. Their practices are essential to enable a learning process to cultivate the knowledge and skills to decide to join multiple state dam construction resistance movements.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article employs historical methodology through the examination of archives, encompassing research reports, academic articles, newsletters, newspapers, and publications generated by development workers. The documents chronicle the experiences of rural Isan women involved in protests against dam constructions on the Mun River [1] from 1950 to 1990. I employ a gender lens to analyze how negotiation and multidimensional transformations influence women's decisions to engage in social movements. I conducted interviews with these women to gather their oral histories and strengthen the article's argument. I adhered to ethical research practices and only disseminated information that the participants consented to share.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The marketizing socioeconomic structures of Isan and their lived experiences as labor migrants influenced "rural Isan women's" decisions to participate in the protests against dam constructions. These key relationships transform women's values from family- and community-based to public participation. Women became the "medium" (*tua klang*) to marketize the local communal economy. Their experiences in the markets and labor migration cultivated "rural Isan women" with new skills and knowledge to confidently express their views, including their dissatisfactions with the dam constructions.

4.1 Socioeconomic Changes in Northeastern Thailand Between 1950-1990

The northeastern region of Thailand, known as "Isan," is the largest region, covering an area of 170,226 square kilometers, which constitutes one-third of the country's total land area (Keyes, 2013: 7). Between 1945 and 1991, during the Cold War, the Thai central government closely monitored the Isan region due to the significant spread of communism in the area. The Khuang Aphaiwong government, in 1947, solicited economic guidance from the United States embassy concerning the baht currency, thereby facilitating the US influence over the nation's financial systems and trade, as well as military support. Thailand emerged as a strategic location for the US to counteract communist insurgency in Southeast Asia. This led to the establishment of four key policies for Thailand (Ibid: 86-87). The initial policy emphasized economic development and fostered authentic friendship and cooperation as a means to counter communism. The US would offer resources to enhance agricultural production, including irrigation, transportation, commercialization of natural resources, and the promotion of market competition.

Anti-communist policies were implemented alongside development programs aimed at restructuring Thailand's economic, social, political, and cultural frameworks. The country's first National Economic Development Plan was officially launched in 1961 and has continued in various iterations since then. A central focus of these plans was the intensified exploitation of natural resources to accelerate economic growth, which involved redirecting surplus resources from rural areas to fund urban development and attract foreign investment (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014: 235). The rural Isan region became a primary target for both political and economic initiatives. The central government allocated substantial funds to develop remote areas and construct roads leading to U.S. air force bases in the Isan region. The Accelerated Rural Development programs further expanded the network of paved roads, connecting the widely dispersed villages throughout Isan (Ibid: 332).

The "Isan Development Project" encompassed both human and infrastructure development initiatives. Rural road construction, in particular, was implemented to facilitate the transportation of equipment for combating communism while simultaneously expanding commercial agriculture to replace subsistence farming. This project yielded both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, local communities gained increased mobility, enabling them to travel beyond their villages in search of new economic opportunities. This exposure facilitated encounters with new people, market economies, and new forms of consumption.

On the other hand, natural resources traditionally governed by local communities were increasingly subjected to new laws and regulations imposed by the central government. For instance, the National Forest Policy of 1985 (Education Center for Isan Community, 1991: 9) encouraged the private sector to cultivate fast-growing trees such as eucalyptus and acacia for the pulp and paper industry. The "Economic Forest Project" led to land ownership conflicts between the private sector and local communities, exemplified by the Paa Phu Kratae land dispute (Ibid: 9).

In 1914, a community had been resettled in Phu Kratae under government promotion. However, in 1957, the government introduced a new policy promoting jute and cotton plantations, and by 1969, the area was designated as part of the Phu Ra-ngum National Reserved Forest. This reclassification transformed the local community into illegal encroachers overnight. The 1985 National Forest Policy exacerbated these unresolved issues, adding further complexity. Another notable example is the "Paa Dong Yai" land conflict, where most of the resettled villagers were originally from Ubon Ratchathani and Roi Et provinces, having relocated to assist civil servants in combating communism during the insurgency of 1978-1979. In 1989, an order was issued to relocate 1,300 households from the area, leaving only 300 households with land for cultivation. However, it was later revealed that the allocated land already had pre-existing owners. The military intervened with heavy machinery, uprooting fruit trees—including mangoes, jackfruits, and sweet tamarinds—that villagers had cultivated, in order to make space for eucalyptus plantations. Many villagers were forcibly relocated to the hills, where they constructed small huts and became farm laborers (Ekhachai, 1987: 38-41).

The construction of the Rasi Salai Dam, which began in October 1993, featured a concrete structure with seven metal sluice gates (Department of Energy Development and Promotion, 2000: 6). Prior to its construction, officials from the Royal Irrigation Department issued a document describing the dam as a modest 4.5-meter-high structure with a reservoir capacity of 31.8 cubic meters. This information led the local community to believe that the dam would not significantly impact the "*paa bung paa tham*," the freshwater swamp forest on which they relied for their livelihoods. Additionally, some residents were informed that the project involved the construction of a simple "weir" that would not disrupt their lives (Boonliam Srisopha, April 28, 2022). As a result, there was no initial opposition to the project. It was only when a large, 9-meter-high concrete dam was completed that the community realized the extent of its impact, as it inundated the entire "*paa bung paa tham*" under its reservoir.

The Pak Mun Dam is situated in Ban Hua Heo village, Khong Chiam District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, approximately 5.5 kilometers from the Mekong River, which forms the border between Thailand and Laos, and 8 kilometers from the Sirindhorn Dam. The construction of the Pak Mun Dam elicited significant concern from the local community (Manager News, March 5, 1993), as they had already experienced the negative impacts of the Sirindhorn Dam, constructed in 1966. The government had assured locals that the dam would allow for the cultivation of paddy rice twice annually and the continuation of their fishing activities. However, upon the dam's completion, these promises went unfulfilled, severely disrupting local livelihoods. Over 6,000 people, comprising 1,270 households, were forced to relocate. Compensation was offered only to those possessing land title deeds, yet at a time when Thailand was still modernizing its land titling system, most locals lacked formal documentation. As a result, only a small number of affected individuals were able to claim compensation. Moreover, many families that received new land found it unsuitable for cultivation

due to the rocky soil conditions (Living River Siam Association, February 28, 2023). Alongside other natural resource policies, such as the designation of National Park zones, the 1985 National Forest Policy, and the construction of large dams, the displacement of local communities and the overlaying of land critical to their livelihoods intensified. This mounting pressure prompted many in the northeastern region to unite in protest against development projects that were devastating their way of life, leading to the formation of the "people's movement." [2]

After 1987, Isan underwent a full mobilization of capitalist development, diversifying and intensifying production across both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors (Manorom, 2020: 99). Under the hybrid government of General Chatichai Choonhavan (1988-1992), a key policy initiative was the transformation of Thailand into a "Newly Industrialized Country" (NIC). This policy prioritized investments in industrialization, aiming to "turn Indochina from a battlefield to a marketplace" and promote regional peace. Consequently, the Isan region became a strategic hub, linking Thailand with other Indochinese nations for trade, tourism, and the industrial exploitation of natural resources (Arpornsuwan, 2012: 187-188). Border marketplaces expanded continuously, supported by the development of transportation networks designed to facilitate the export of goods to neighboring countries, particularly through the construction of the Friendship Bridges over the Mekong River in the border provinces of Nong Khai, Mukdahan, and Nakhon Phanom.

During the four decades of development in Isan (1950-1990), a significant shift occurred as the region transitioned from an agricultural-based economy to one increasingly focused on manufacturing and services. Despite this shift, the labor force in the agricultural sector remained relatively stable, comprising approximately 70% of the population. Farmers diversified their crops, with increased production of sugarcane, beans, maize, and jute, accompanied by an expansion of farmland (Ibid: 45). However, farming practices underwent substantial changes, leading to the emergence of a new form of rural society. Satthayanurak (2016: 12-13) characterized this transformation as the rise of a "Rural Entrepreneur Society," reflecting a shift from traditional vertical, patronage-based relationships to more horizontal, egalitarian social structures in rural areas.

4.2 **Mothers and Wives Amidst Changing Isan Society**

In Thai society, traditional family values associated women primarily with the roles of "mothers" and "wives." These social norms dictated societal perceptions of familial care and marriage, with the selection of a life partner often based on considerations of class and economic status. However, as Western values gained acceptance, romantic love became an additional factor in partner selection (Bunnak, 2020: 31-39). Moreover, during periods of political, economic, and social reform, women from the high and middle classes encountered new responsibilities, with expectations of women's roles as "wives" becoming less traditional. Following the enactment of the Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1921, women gained greater access to public spaces and enjoyed equal educational opportunities alongside men. The 1932 political revolution further expanded women's political engagement, granting them the right to vote and run for parliamentary office (Chamratphan et al., 1992: 61-62). Subsequent amendments to local government regulations allowed women to compete for positions previously reserved for men, such as subdistrict leaders and village chiefs. These more inclusive policies facilitated increased participation of women in both the workforce and the political sphere.

Ewsiwong (1996: 112-122) argued that rural women were not only responsible for the care of their families and the management of household resources, but also actively contributed to the production process and played significant roles in the preservation of cultural heritage. In many regions, rural women were instrumental in maintaining and transmitting cultural traditions, customs, and religious practices to future generations, though they often held a lower social status compared to men, particularly within Buddhist customs. The roles of rural men and

women were flexible and varied according to specific social contexts. However, religious ceremonial spaces continued to impose gender-based distinctions, reinforcing separate and unequal roles for men and women.

Perception of rural Isan women are often restricted to domestic roles, such as family care and making clothes for their households. Employment opportunities outside the home were predominantly allocated to men. Ko Sawatdiphanit discussed the status and roles of Isan women before 1957 in his book *Good Old Days Isan*:

"…*Women do domestic labor. Men pursue tasks outside the home. They go to the fields or the forests. They gather and chop firewood. At night, women make a fire for warmth in winter. The fire helps brighten the night while they spin threads, process cotton and silk, and make weaving patterns. All family members gather around the fire for warmth. At nine o'clock in the evening, the husbands leave to bed, while the housewives and children persist in their tasks. During the rainy season, housewives illuminate lanterns and partake in activities either upstairs or downstairs, based on their convenience*…" (Sawatdiphanit, 1991: 23)

Klausner (1994: 69), an anthropologist at Yale University, contended in his book, *Reflections on Thai Culture Volume 1*, (Satorn Watthanatham Thai Lem 1) that the roles of young Isan women and men in 1955 exhibited greater flexibility than the portrayal by Sawatdiphanit. At times, women could assume men's roles by engaging in external employment. Women were capable of performing tasks traditionally associated with men, including cutting firewood, constructing houses, and casting nets for fishing. Women were responsible for spinning cotton threads and weaving; however, they were also capable of performing many tasks typically assigned to men when necessary, such as during periods when husbands fell ill or relocated to the capital for work. The depiction of rural Isan women in the fields while ploughing the land became ubiquitous.

The descriptions of "rural Isan women" illustrate the distinct yet flexible roles of women and men among Isan families. Furthermore, "rural Isan women" were responsible for managing the maternal family's assets and inheritances. This resulted in a less distinct differentiation between Isan women and men. The gender roles were distinctly delineated concerning cultural traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. Buddhist values specifically restrict "ordination" to men, allowing only them to express "*katunyu*," or gratitude towards their parents. Consequently, men maintained a superior status compared to women within this belief system. Distinct social expectations for men and women further constrain women. For instance, women faced restrictions on traveling and working outside their homes (Thammawat, 2000: 57). These complexities highlight the necessity of considering the multidimensional aspects of gender roles in Isan.

The roles and status of women and men evolved concurrently with changes in the community. Klausner (1994: 154-156) noted that, in 1979, the increase in population and the expansion of the monetary economy into nearly all rural areas resulted in a diminished distinction in roles between women and men. Both young women and men had higher education. A significant number pursued advanced studies. The multidimensional changes in rural Isan significantly influenced gender roles within the Isan population and contributed to an increasing number of women in the labor market. Initially restricted to generational transfer, land ownership increasingly came under the control of capitalists. Consequently, numerous women were compelled to depart from their families for work opportunities. The living conditions of rural women declined as they transitioned into cheap laborers. Their roles as transmitters of traditions, customs, and religious practices also declined. Nevertheless, the expectations for women to assume familial caregiving roles persisted (Wongprom, 1996: 38).

Inadequate income from agricultural production prompted both rural women and men to migrate in search of employment opportunities, subsequently remitting their earnings to support their families. Whittaker (2004: 50-53) observed that in a village in Roi Et province during 1992-1993, temporary migration of laborers began following the completion of compulsory education by young women and men, who averaged 20 years of age, and after the rice harvest. The number of emigrated men slightly surpassed that of women. In 1992, the composition of migrant labor in this village was 57.1% male and 41.4% female. The majority relocated to Bangkok for employment in service sectors or garment manufacturing. The village allowed the daughters to engage in external employment to earn income and remit to their families. Nevertheless, the long migration distance for rural Isan women, although endorsed by their families, remained significantly constrained to safeguard the family's reputation and to avoid derogatory labels often directed at women, such as "prostitutes."

The studies indicated a transition from the traditional structure that confined "rural Isan women" to caregiving roles for children and families, towards more flexible gender roles. As many rural Isan women emigrated from their villages, they acquired new knowledges. Nonetheless, traditional customs persistently expected rural Isan women to return to their villages, marry, raise families, and care for their elderly parents. Many may be subjected to gossip or insults from other villagers. Nevertheless, the new skills and knowledge acquired by Isan women, akin to those of Isan men, fostered greater confidence in expressing their opinions within their villages and gradually enhanced their visibility in public spaces.

4.3 **"Rural Isan Women" As Economic Agency In** 1950-1990

Historically, "Isan" culture relied on a barter system, primarily for three reasons (Theerasasawat, 2003: 121). The lack of essential natural resources, particularly salt, which is vital for cooking and food preservation. The lack of essential agricultural and daily labor-saving tools, such as knives, axes, hoes, shovels, and pottery, which required particular skills and specific soil characteristics. Finally, the limited rainfall during the rainy season resulted in reduced rice production, which was insufficient for consumption. Locals had to find other goods within their community for bartering with other communities.

Most of the riverside communities along the Mun River held a small amount of land. They mostly relied on fishing to engage in barter for rice. Occasionally, villagers from distant areas arrived at the riverside fishery villages with substantial quantities of rice to engage in barter for fish. At the onset of the rice planting season, typically in July, many carts laden with rice arrived along the Mun River to exchange for fish. The fish returned with the carts in preparation for the forthcoming rice planting season. This became a common saying among locals: "*pai haab pla; ma haab khao*," which translates literally to "go carry fish; to come carry rice" (Sangkeaw, 1997: 34-35). Petty traders exchanged various products and clothing for fish. The prices of their products were compared to those of fish. Occasionally, the products were provided initially, followed by a subsequent collection of the fish during later trips (Friedrichs, et al, 2000: 4-6). The exchange values were indeterminate, contingent upon the dynamics between the two parties. Relatives and close friends generally received greater support (Chamratphan, et al, 1993: 6). The flourishing "*kharay*" or petty trading [3] significantly increased rural consumption demands and facilitated the gradual adaptation of rural communities to new trading practices and market structures.

Social values and traditional beliefs continue to restrict rural Isan women from traveling long distances from their villages. The expansion of transportation networks in rural villages has afforded rural Isan women considerable opportunities for travel beyond previous limitations. Lapanun (1993: 217) observed that, in 1987, transportation in the vicinity of Khon Kaen town remained inadequate. During the dry season, men transported products, including cucumbers and chilies, from the paddy fields to the Chinese traders in town. The new roads that traversed the villages enabled more women

to bring their products directly from the paddy fields for sale in town—via passenger trucks—and bypassing the Chinese traders.

Commercial banks in the Isan region expanded exponentially. At the onset of the development era in 1957, there existed merely 12 bank branches. In 1993, the count reached 402 (Theerasasawat, 1995:127). This indicates the growth of trade and investment in the Isan region over the past thirty years of development. Access to commercial banks was limited to a select few in urban areas and local capitalists. The provision of equal access to capital was constrained by legal regulations and the types of assets deemed acceptable as collateral by the banks.

The introduction of development projects in rural communities alleviated the stringent traditional social and cultural norms that confined women to the domestic sphere. A significant number of women utilized this opportunity to travel and pursue new prospects aimed at generating income to remit to their families. Some rural Isan women successfully improved their economic status by becoming small business owners in their villages.

4.3.1 Rural Isan Women As "*Po Kharay-Mae Kharay*" Petty Traders Or the Medium Between Local Communities and Market and New Forms of Consumption

The increase in trading in Isan, particularly along the railway and transportation networks, opened opportunities for rural Isan women to show their capacity to do trades. Women from nearby towns traveled by "Skylab" motorized tricycles or buses to sell their products directly in town. Those living further from town had the opportunity to learn how to engage in the "kharay" petty trade, and they also built a network of petty traders in other villages.

The "Kharay" petty trade in Isan has a long history, dating back to the "salt empire" established by the "Kula" ethnic people [4]. The Kula were petty traders in Isan who came from the Shan (Tai Yai) communities in northern Thailand for a long time. Along their journey, they carried commodities to sell in various villages and stayed overnight in temples. A caravan of Kharay petty traders consisted of 5 to 100 members, primarily relatives, although locals also joined some caravans. Many petty traders married the women in the villages and settled in Isan. A record from the mid-1880s states that at least 60 "chaw kula" (Kula people) married local women and settled in the town of Ubon Ratchathani and its surrounding areas. Some of the married women migrated with the kharay petty trader caravans. The Kula mostly sold silk, silver handicrafts, jewelry, knives, and many other small commodities. They also trade animals such as elephants, cattle, and horses (Wongthet, 2003: 342-355).

Kharay petty trading has been an integral part of the Isan people's history for a long time, manifesting in various forms. Many families opted *kharay* petty trading as their way of earning income. In an interview with "Sa-nguan," a leader in the protest against the Rasi Salai Dam (April 26, 2022), she explained that she was the oldest daughter in a poor family. She had 10 siblings. Her family carried any products collected from the paa bung paa tham swamp forests or produced by the family's 21-rai of farming land—such as mushrooms, bananas, and watermelons—to sell from villages to villages. She completed the compulsory Grade 4 education and continued to support her parents until she married her husband in 1967. Her husband was a "*po kharay*" (male petty trader) from Surin province who came to buy cattle and silk and sell jewelry like necklaces and rings in her village. After their wedding, she moved to live with her husband in Ratanaburi District, Surin Province for about ten years before returning home in Rasi Salai District, Sisaket Province.

Sa-nguan and her husband rode their motorcycle to buy, sell, and exchange commodities between Sisaket and Surin provinces. During the flooding season, they put the motorcycle on the hired boat to travel from village to village. The commodities they traded included shirts and blouses, sarong for men and women, student uniforms, and pha khao ma (fabric mostly used by men). In 1978, they began buying "silk" from more villagers and selling commodities on "credits" or in exchange for

chickens or buffalos, which would then be sold in the market in Surin. In Surin, the silk store provided "credit" by allowing petty traders to bring the commodities first. Some stores used the trust and honesty system to allow purchases on credit. Others required the payers to install with their national identification card.

Kharay petty trading enabled rural Isan women to travel to many villages and enhance their capacities in many dimensions. First, they developed new strategies to increase profits, such as sorting different silk qualities, exchanging goods for domestic animals, and diversifying their commodities to meet different preferences among rural villagers. Other members of the woman's family provided support in handling resources. Second, the women gradually mastered negotiating skills to get "credits" for their commodities and build credibility with large shops in Surin town. Note that the trading relationships that mae kharay, or women petty traders, had with other villagers were different from their relationships with large shops in Surin, whose owners were primarily of Chinese descent. The villagers tied their "credits" with mae kharay/women petty traders to traditional communal values, much like kinship. You'd trust your family enough to "credit" the commodities. Although mae kharay could retain positive relationships with the large shops in town, it was not sufficient to serve as collateral. They needed to establish their credibility by presenting their "national identification cards" as collateral. Third, they were the "medium" between different forms of consumption in remotely rural areas and urban settings. They promoted consumption by providing a variety of commodities to meet market demands and presenting new products to local communities, building new forms of consumption. In addition, the new trading relationships enabled many mae kharay to gain enough "capital" to buy a rice mill to serve the community, alleviating poor families to become small business owners.

4.3.2 **Roles and Lived Experiences of "Rural Isan Women" in Fish Markets**

In the past, fish in rivers were more abundant, and sharing fish among villagers was common. Villagers would walk or cycle through the paddy fields to sell their fish at the town district market if they needed "money" to repair their house, fishing gear, or agricultural tools. Female traders from the town may visit certain riverside communities, rowing their boats to purchase fish directly from the villagers. In certain cases, the villagers acquired trading skills and went on to become traders. The community-level traders built the trade networks between the community and larger traders in the market.

"Sompong" (27 August 2022) was a prominent female leader who has been protesting the Pak Mun Dam since its beginning. She was the oldest daughter of the five siblings. As a child, she rowed a boat across the Mun River to attend Wang Sabang Tai School in Khong Chiam District, Ubon Ratchathani Province. By the time she finished her Grade 4 education, she had sharpened her rowing skills. During her day off from school, she went fishing with her father and brothers. She learned how to search for fish and make fishing gear. When she turned thirteen years old, her father taught her to collect the fish she caught and from other relatives to sell at the market in Phibun Mangsahan District, Ubon Ratchathani Province. Her father told her to travel with the passenger boat, which started from Khong Chiam District to Ban Tung Lung, Ban Wang Sabang, and Ban Tha Siew, with Kaeng Saphue near Phibun Mangsahan District as the endpoint. The type of boat that was used as passenger boats was called "reau khood" (เรือขุด) It was three meter wide with space on the side and the tail for passengers. The head of the boat was reserved for fish and other items.

By fifteen (around 1969), Sompong's father had an accident that led to his death. She received a one-meter-wide boat as inheritance and continued fishing after her father. She taught her young siblings how to fish and took the responsibility from her father to take care of the family. When she turned seventeen, she got married and shifted from a fisher folk to a *mae kha*/female trader by buying fish from the village to sell at the market.

The experiences that Sompong gained between thirteen and eighteen years equipped her with trading skills and relationships with both large- and small-scale merchants and traders in the market at Phibun Mangsahan District. She learned how to negotiate fish prices with local villagers and large-scale merchants in the market as she observed how the fish prices fluctuated daily and set pricing agreements with village-level female traders.

Not only did Sompong establish stronger bonds with both large- and small-scale female traders in Phibun Mangsahan District, but she also grew close to numerous female traders in the riverside villagers surrounding the Mun River. Similarly, we could observe similar transformations of relationships with the fish market in other riverside villages along the Mun River—from Ban Dan, Ban Khan Puai, to Ban Hua Heo.

The transformation of rural Isan women into direct traders, like Sompong and her trader network, depicted the period when many communities began to participate in the market economy. In Sompong's story, her father was the person who taught her to trade with the Vietnamese "yuan" female traders who rowed boats to procure fish in the villages at the time. Her father recognized the possibilities for the fish and encouraged his "daughter" to travel to the district market to sell them. While the stories of female traders in other eight villages along the Mun River might be different, their situations exemplified how rural Isan women engaged in the market economy and learned the market mechanism.

Prior to 1989, trading was founded on principles of integrity and fairness. The borrower may return with either cash or goods. It corresponded with the livelihoods of the fishing community. This exchange also supported the networks of fisherfolks, allowing them to benefit despite fluctuations in market prices. This harmonized with the traditional "borrowing" system of the Isan people, which emphasized reciprocity. The return will be established by an agreement between the lender and the borrower. It may manifest as cash, rice, or fish at an equivalent value. Profit and collateral relied on trust and honesty between the two parties (Sompong, 27 August 2022). This value system was endorsed by village-level female traders, district market female traders, fisherfolk, and boat owners. The communication and negotiating processes among the involved actors were crucial in regulating fish prices and averting exploitation.

Trading fish beyond the village level enabled Sompong to see the opportunity to change her career. As she learned the market system and adapted it to local community context, she became the "medium" in the commodity exchange by calculating the cost and profits. This helped her to elevate her family status to become more secure and simultaneously completely meet her duty as the "oldest sister," who had to assume her "father's" responsibility to take care of her young brothers and mother.

The rural Isan women portrayed in this article had relatively smoothly transformed their lives into capitalistic economies. This image contrasts Sunthornpesat's (2005: 78-79) portrayal of the traders (both men and women) in rural Isan during the Cold War (1945-1991), which described the process as "…difficult to happen due to strict local moral and ethical systems that prevented any opportunity or hindered access to such transformation. Thus, traders came from elsewhere. If the merchant or trader was able to reside in the community, he would behave differently from local customs or uphold different moral values…" The trading practices of rural Isan women demonstrated that "traders" could emerge in remote rural villages, provided they had the opportunity and capacity to integrate local traditional values and beliefs with their trade. They became the small-scale source of capital to provide for other villagers in case of an emergency. Trading with outsiders had elevated the status of the trader's family, as illustrated by the stories of Sompong and Sa-nguan.

Rural Isan women became the "medium" between their communities (as well as other villages) and the market. Their family members played a supporting role. For example, the husbands and sons

went fishing and came home to bundle fish bought from other fisher folks in preparation for the women to sell to the market. In the case of silk, other family members assisted by sorting the purchased or exchanged silk according to its quality, preparing it for sale to a large shop in Surin Town.

These learning and adaptation processes supported and related to traditional community values. Karl Polanyi (2001: 71) argued that the economic systems do not emerge in a free and isolated manner. Instead, the community intergenerationally inherited the behavior and traditional values embedded in social relations and market plans. The two women exemplified here adapted the values that the community collectively held—trust and honesty—to control how they traded fish, negotiated as they became *mae kharay* petty traders, and exchanged their commodities in the market. They made the new form of capitalist economy applicable to the traditional communal economy, simultaneously improved the local trading system to become acceptable.

4.3.3 **Lived Experiences of "Rural Isan Women" as Labor Migrants in Urban Bangkok**

In a study by Kiso (2007: 204–230), women migrant laborers from Isan in 1977–1978 changed the social and cultural constraints in many villages, such as the restriction on long distance solo traveling. The constraints to keep women as the main laborers in the paddy fields, elderly caregivers, and transmitters of family and community traditions shifted in alignment with household economics. In addition to the traditional practice of searching for food for family members, caregiving also encompassed the pursuit of jobs and income for the family. Rural Isan men and women share economic responsibilities. The desire to visit the capital and live a modern lifestyle became an important factor for many rural women to become migrant laborers. After 1987, Isan people continually emigrated to other regions of Thailand, particularly Bangkok and its periphery. It was estimated in 1990 that as much as half of the migrants in Bangkok came from Isan, although there were not that many rural Isan women. Most of the migrants relied on their family networks to provide job opportunities (Uiyanont, 2017: 64).

"Samlee" (27 April 2022), a prominent women leader of the movement against the Rasi Salai Dam, shared her journey to Bangkok to work as a construction worker with her sister in 1978 and at the garment factory later. She would remit part of her salary to her parents. Not only did many rural Isan women find employment in Bangkok, but many rural Isan men also sought employment in Bangkok. Many observed that the villagers who went to work in Bangkok came back with whiter skin, more good-looking, and better means to earn an income. As media, television, and radio expanded, news and information reached villages and influenced young men and women to desire new opportunities and lifestyles. Another leader of the movement against the Rasi Salai Dam, "Mae Pha" (24 August 2022), had eight siblings and was a rice farmer. Once she got married, her husband migrated to Bangkok. The husbands returned when they became ill and could no longer work to support the family. This was when "Mae Pha" had to seek jobs in Bangkok to generate income for her children and husband.

When rural Isan women chose to travel away from their village, they faced many challenges, including negative comments. Some villages loosened their strict beliefs and value systems as the transportation networks expanded and new perspectives were shared by those who emigrated before. In turn, many villagers became curious about other kinds of social lives. These factors created new hopes and desires for young women and men to migrate for work elsewhere)Kittiarsa, 2014(.

Before rural Isan women transitioned from their domestic or private space into the political movements or public, they had already stepped into a different kind of public space as various forms of "economic actors." They were *mae kharay* petty traders, fish traders in the market, and migrant laborers in Bangkok. These new roles had given them the knowledge, experiences, and social skills

that would be beneficial to their engagement in sociopolitical movements—as well as paving the way for their leadership roles in the future.

5. CONCLUSION

The significant changes to Isan's economic structure and its market relations after 1950 led to a shift in social and cultural norms for rural Isan women. Previously, their sole responsibility was to care for their families and stay in the domestic sphere, but the economic changes empowered them to take on prominent roles in various public spaces. This illustrates how the shift in economic structures and the expansion of transportation networks to remote areas have given rural Isan women more opportunities to utilize their skills in a variety of ways. They interacted with the market and developed their own small businesses that could provide for their whole families and relatives, improving the living conditions for their family members.

In public spaces, they became the medium between the external trading system and their communities. The community's traditional values, which were based on honesty, trust, kinship, and friendships, were the foundations of "credibility" among them. Simultaneously, the rural Isan women assumed the responsibility of transporting a wide range of commodities from the town to the local villages. Their roles as mediums enabled them to gain new skills and knowledge in the market, negotiate with outsiders, build a new "credit" system that was unique and aligned to local livelihoods, and become the "small-scale source of capital" in their villages. These new aspects of rural Isan women reflected that rural Isan communities had engaged with capitalism. The women also played a crucial role in building a reciprocal “network” of multiple types of trading, such as a network of consumers of petty trading in the villages, a network of fisher folks, a network of inter-village female traders, and a network of female traders in the town districts.

For rural Isan women, domestic and public spaces were inseparable, interrelated, and supportive. Their goals were to improve the quality of life for their families and kin, which remained the core values of rural Isan women.

Their new roles in the economic system were crucial in enabling them to courageously oppose, negotiate, and resist dam constructions that could threaten their family's livelihoods and their roles as small business owners. The dam projects could fatally affect her position as the “medium” for the trading system and her villages, which were the new values that they gained from their lived experiences.

Rural Isan women's status in the new era reflected their "agency" in triple burdens simultaneously: domestic, public, and political spaces in resource governance (Manorom, 2020: 99). Rural Isan women transitioned from being primarily focused on their families and communities to taking on more active roles in public spaces, which was influenced by their education and the evolving economic, social, and political environments in their region and country.

6. NOTES

[1] The Mun River is a main river in northeastern (Isan) Thailand. Its 640-km course flows through six (Isan) provinces: from Nakhon Ratchasima, to Buriram, Surin, Roi Et, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani, meeting with the Mekong River at the confluence.

[2] Social movements, or people's movements, consist of groups of individuals impacted by state development initiatives and natural resource policies, which encompass forests, land, dams, and fisheries. Resistance was most active from 1980 to 1990.

[3] *Mae kharay* indicates a female petty trader. *Mae* means women or mothers. *Kharay* means petty trading. *Mae kharay* is different from *mae kha* or female traders for their mobility and expansive trading journey to go from village to village, from house to house. *Mae kha* tend to remain static in a place like a market. Similarly, *po kharay* indicates a male petty trader.

[4] Kula is an ethnic group that migrated from the regions currently known as Shan and Mon States in Myanmar. During the late 19th century, they migrated in caravans as petty and gem traders to major cities in northeastern and eastern Thailand.

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