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Women's Empowerment and Male Overseas Migration:
The Case of Villages in Northeast Thailand

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Women's Empowerment and Male Overseas Migration: The case of Villages in Northeast Thailand

Chapter 1 Introduction

This paper addresses the consequences of male overseas migration for rural women left behind in villages of Udon Thani Province in Northeast Thailand. It explores whether male overseas migration changed gender relations and whether it has contributed to the women's empowerment. For the purpose of this paper, male confines to the husband while women confine to the wife.

1. 1. Background

Northeast Thailand is an area that covers about one third of Thailand's area and it is the nation's most impoverished region. Most of the population is farmers but because irrigated paddy lands are limited and rice is mostly rain-fed, the production fluctuates greatly from year to year which makes these farmers' lives difficult. The soil is poor and suffers from both droughts and floods (Bello, 1998, Yamamoto, 1999).

Domestic seasonal migration has been one of the survival strategies for the villagers since the 1950s (Pitayanon, 1986). In the slack season, both men and women would look for daily paid job such as sugar cane cutting, construction work or go to Bangkok to work in factories or work in construction sites. In this area, most of the households have at least one family member who works in Bangkok or overseas to earn cash. The poorer the household, the more they rely on remittances through migration (Richter et al, 1997).

Since late 1970s, overseas migration came in to the scene¹. The 'Year Book of Employment Statistics' (Department of Employment, 2000) shows that the most common

¹ Northeast regions led the way in the build up of labour migration overseas with the major role played by the American airbases and associated road systems constructed there during the Vietnam War. This led to cash economy and consumerism and provided better access to Bangkok based recruitment agencies that established the links to the Middle East and later to East Asian countries (APMRN, 1997).

pattern of overseas migration today is men going to Taiwan² as construction or factory workers normally under a two-year contract. Many villagers preferred going overseas than working in Bangkok because the money they could earn was much higher. 75 per cent of the total Thai overseas workers come from Northeast (Department of Employment, 1999:6)³ and Udon Thani is the biggest rural manpower-sending province (Aknit et al, 2000:4).

In order to work overseas, the villagers pay “commission fee” to the recruitment agencies that organise passports, visas and working contracts. The fee that the villagers have to pay is triple to five times the amount of their yearly income. Therefore, most of the villagers borrow money from moneylenders or those who have sufficient land are able to borrow from the bank.⁴

Though some studies have shown that overseas migrant workers are not people from the poorest of the poor, or unskilled or those who have least education (Skeldon, 2000:376, Portes and Rumbant, 1990, Palmer, 1985:2), in Udon Thani, the poorest of the poor do migrate and they are the ones who are less educated (Department of Employment, 1999, Aknit et al, 2000). Money lenders are eager to support hard working people regardless of wealth or education because they are sure they can gain profit from them. Though there is no available village specific data, in the four villages where the researcher conducted the interview, 40 per cent of the male⁵ go overseas to work. These men were farmers who only had four to six years of primary education. In overseas, they are hired as construction workers, factory workers or agricultural workers. The destinations were Saudi Arabia and Libya in the late 1970s and Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei and Japan from

² Taiwan allowed unskilled foreign workers to be recruited legally in 1989. Taiwan attracted over half of the 150,000 – 180,000 official labour migrants sent from Thailand each year. This is about one third of total Thai workers abroad and comprises about half of the foreign workforce of Taiwan (Jones, 2000).

³ The data in the 1999 Department of Employment actually refers to 1997

⁴ The moneylender will charge about 48 to 50 percent of interest per year while the bank only charges 17 per cent (the data was gathered through the interview).

⁵ From the discussion with the government officers in Udon Thani Employment Office, village heads and school teachers.

the late 1980s. Most of the men leave the village for two years and come back to the village though many repeat migrating overseas⁶.

The reason that the researcher focuses in overseas migration is because overseas migration may have bigger impact on women in terms of the amount of remittances and length of the husband's absence. The disparity of the amount of remittance between domestic and overseas migration is so wide that one can tell if the member of the household has been overseas or not by just looking at the house they live in⁷.

1. 2. Problem Area

There are several studies about male migration and its effects on women. These studies reveal variegated results, tendencies and complexities. Some cases in Botswana (Brown, 1983), Indonesia (Rodenburg, 1997) and Lesotho (Gordon, 1981:67-75) show that male migration has led to destruction of families and the communities because as long term migration became so widely spread and continuous, men eventually got detached from the families and started to abandon their responsibilities as household heads. These women suffered from heavier burden taking care of the household and the fields without financial or institutional support. Even when remittances were sent providing financial support, women did not necessarily benefit because the money sent could be under control of the husband's kin (Gulati, 1993). Again, even in cases where women succeed in managing the resources to fulfill the role as household heads, the ultimate control remained with men (Rodenburg, 1997). Cases in Yemen (Palmer, 1985), Pakistan (op.cit) and India (Gulati, 1993) showed that some women had to live with the husbands' in-laws or became under their supervision that made women loose control and put them in a worse condition.

Studies also showed positive consequences such as increase of material goods that would contribute to building status and improvements to women's lives, enjoyment of increased

⁶ There were also women from Udon Thani who go overseas, consisting about 10 per cent of the overseas migrants to Taiwan (This number comes from the documents from Udon Thani Employment Office of the year 1998 to 2000).

⁷ Those who had their family members overseas mostly have a concrete house compared to the wooden

free time, widening up of the world view (Rodenburg, 1997, Gulati, 1993, Chant, 1992:63). Hadi (1999:54) says that women's status increases in line with the duration of adult men's stay overseas because women are forced to take a major role in the household and this substantially increases their role in decision-making which enhances their ability to develop independently and helps them to cultivate new interests and discover hidden potential. There were also cases that husband's absence contributed in breaking down women's isolation within the community and brought them into contact with a wider network of institutions (Gulati, 1993).

Whether negative or positive, the fact remains that due to overseas migration, many women are likely to face new experiences such as making major decision within the household, in farming, and handling of money which may used to be men's roles. These new experiences and responsibilities may lead to women gaining greater confidence but may also lead to increased stress. Gordon's study (1981:71) revealed that wives taking greater responsibilities were experiencing greater stress than enjoying such a role. Chant (1992:50) and Rodenburg (1997) discuss that in cases where women were capable of taking more responsibilities in what used to be men's domain, they found out that social structure such as unequal property rights, labour market, and ideology, prevent women to benefit in the real sense. Meaning that, gender division of labour was changing in the sense that women were taking more tasks that used to be men's domain but were not given adequate resources and control which made women mere cheap and convenient labour. These studies demonstrated that men's absence as a result of overseas migration may both pose limits and opportunities for women to change their lives and become empowered. Within the existing literature on the effect of male overseas migration, positive changes in gender relations, or increase in empowerment were not much seen.

My own experience of working in the village of Udon Thani Province, has led to initial insights which tend to reveal that most of the women taking leadership positions in the village were wives whose husbands were working overseas. These women tended to have relatively higher mobility which allowed them to participate in events outside the

house of households that has no one migrated overseas.

village and communicate with government officials. However, a closer examination of this issue is necessary to better understand the effects of male migration on the lives of women in this context.

1. 3. Research Questions and Objectives

Given the perceptions of existing studies and the experience of the researcher working with rural women whose husband's were overseas, the following are the research questions.

- 1. Does male (husband) overseas migration bring changes in gender relations?*
- 2. Under what condition can male overseas migration contribute to women's (wives) empowerment?*

Rural women in Northeast Thailand are known as relatively autonomous in the social system and local culture which can be seen in patterns of inheritance and residence (Pyne, 1994:20, Phongpaichit, 1980:8-9, Yoddumnern-Attig, 1992). Hence, considering this, it becomes important to look into how male overseas migration has affected women's position and gender relations in their households and communities, and in their inner-self that may differ from the existing literature. The paper will try to analyse the dimensions and complexity of gender relations affected by overseas male migration focusing on 'women's empowerment'.

1. 4. Scope and Limitations

This paper analyses whether there are changes in gender relations and gender ideology brought by male overseas migration, and whether accordingly rural women in the villages of Northeast Thailand become empowered. 'Male overseas migration' in this paper limits to poor married male going overseas for employment leaving their wives and children behind in order to improve their living standards at home. Women treated in this paper are all wives of the migrants from the same Lao-Thai ethnicity, same class (poor rural women from an agricultural background), Buddhist, with only primary education (though there are six women who have or are in the process of acquiring secondary

education in adult learning school during the husbands' migration), and are or were married and have children and are not yet grandmothers.

The paper examines the changes in gender relations mainly between the husband and wife and investigates how women were affected by male overseas migration. It questions if such changes contributed to women's empowerment. The analysis in this paper can pose limitations in determination. It is because the dimensions of empowerment of the women that could be seen now might change by passages of time or due to external factors and depending on women's life stages because 'empowerment' is an on-going process. Some empowerment dimensions can be maintained and some cannot be maintained under a certain condition. It might even fluctuate with unexpected factors such as accidents, disaster, or even major transformation of economic situation. At the same time, one can be disempowered in one point but can have a chance to learn from failure and become empowered. Thus, this paper cannot claim an exhaustive coverage of all long-run consequences of male overseas migration throughout the whole women's life.

1. 5. Organisation of the Paper

Chapter 1 provides the overall background of the study and its objective. Chapter 2 gives the explanation of the two concepts which are 'women's empowerment' and 'gender relation'. It also gives the information of how the field research was done. Chapter 3 explores how gender ideology affects the gender relations in rural Northeast Thailand. The chapter aims to help the readers understand the findings from the field described in the next chapters. Chapter 4 presents findings from the field research. It examines whether there were changes in gender relations and women's awareness brought by male overseas migration contributed to women's empowerment. Chapter 5 provides life stories of six women. While chapter 4 presents the overall results in snapshots, this chapter tries to capture the process of changes in gender divisions and gender ideology. Chapter 6 summarises the main findings and answers the research questions.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology of Field Research

2.1. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, two main concepts necessary for understanding the research problem will be defined and operationalised. These are concepts of 'women's empowerment' and 'gender relations'.

2.1.1. What is Women's Empowerment?

Development literature tends to refer 'empowerment' as increasing the power of those disadvantaged in prevailing social relations. The concept of empowerment, in this sense, applies to both genders whereas disadvantaged men are almost as powerless as poor women in access to material resources in the public domain, however men, remain privileged within the patriarchal structure (Kabeer, 1999b:12-3). Therefore 'women's empowerment' has a special implication. For activist feminist groups who originally demanded women's empowerment, the latter meant changes in the processes and structures that reproduce women's subordination and oppression (Young, 1993:158). In order to overcome these structures, they focus on the importance of women's awareness on unequal gender relations through building confidence, self-reliance, internal-strength (cf. Moser, 1998, Young, 1993, Oxaal and Baden, 1997:1-2, Longwe, 1995, Kabeer, 1999, 2000).

Batliwala (1997) defines women's empowerment as a process of changing existing power relations on material, human and intellectual resources. She sees that power relations must change through redistribution of resources by giving people much more equal access and control over resources. She also sees that it is not enough to give women education, access to the labour market and employment but to change the ideology that constructs the family value, the educational system, the religion as well as the social, economic, legal and political structures that constantly reproduce these power relations which could be gender-biased. However, to change the ideology, she says women must gain confidence to change the low image of themselves and understand their capacities.

In order to achieve this, she emphasises the process starting with consciousness raising, mobilising and organising women into groups.

Kabeer (1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) defines women's empowerment as 'a process by which those who have been denied to make strategic life choices⁸ acquire such an ability'. She sees that women need to develop critical consciousness in looking at their position. Because for those women who internalised their culturally perceived less-valued social status, would choose to accept subordinated position to men even if they would be given equal material, social⁹, human resources¹⁰ (Nussabaum, 1995:61-87). As oppressed people may lack the courage to choose to develop and use their capabilities, women lack the will to do so because they themselves have low self esteem (Kabeer, 1994, Nussbaum, 1995, Sen, 1990). Consequently, women's empowerment include both individual changes in inner-self and collective action stressing the importance of awareness of women themselves 'to *recognise* their deprivation and their potential ability, and *choose* to develop and use their capabilities' (Kabeer, 2000). Meaning that women should recognise their unjust subordinated position so that they can be agents for changing unequal power relations.

2.1.2. What constructs unequal gender relations?

The above section explained how women's awareness is important for their empowerment in order to overcome internalisation of their subordinated social status as person of less value than men. This section describes the situation of unequal gender relations that ideologically reinforces and legitimises subordination of women. However one must note that gender relation is socially structured power relations and it varies from one society and culture to another, and within each culture. It also changes with external circumstances overtime such as economic transformation or in times of crisis (March et al, 1999:18, Young, 1993:138-141). Gender relations again varies within the same

⁸ Choices that are critical for people to live the lives they want. Ex) Choice of livelihood, freedom of movement, whether to marry, who to marry, whether they have children, how many children to have, etc (Kabeer, 2001:19)

⁹ Social resources are made up of claims, obligations and expectations which inhere in the relationships, networks, and connections which prevail in different spheres of life and which enable people to improve their situation and life chances beyond what would be possible through their effort alone (Kabeer, 2000:20)

gender group depending on the class, age and its life stages¹¹ (lecture notes, Meynen, 1987). However, in most societies, gender relations have systematically put women in subordinated position to men (Kabeer, 1994:58). The following would explain how unequal gender relations are constructed by looking from four categories of gender divisions.

2.1.2.1. Gender Division of Labour

In all societies, men and women are assigned tasks, activities, and responsibilities according to their sex which are socially constructed. Gender division of labour refers to what each gender is assigned and/or excluded from specific activities. It also includes valuations and remuneration of such tasks in terms of prestige, privileges and authority.

In the household, generally, women undertake reproductive and productive tasks that are unpaid or underpaid. Many girls have to take responsibility of these domestic tasks from their early age which may prevent them to go to school and, corollary, widen the gap between girls and boys in terms of knowledge, skill and information. While women also do productive work or even when cases that women are earning the majority of the household income, men are perceived to be the primary bread winners. Men are also engaged in reproductive work but they generally do not have clearly defined reproductive roles. Looking after the children, the sick and the elders are thought to be women's duties. These domestic forms of work tend to attach women to home and restrict them to participate in highly valued or highly remunerated work (Mackintosh, 1984:11-15). Besides the conjugal relationship, household structure and composition influence gender division of labour in the household. In an extended household, the roles differ from the age and status and between the same genders. For example, in an extended household, the young wife is likely to be given the position that resembles a servant, under control of not only the husband or his male kin but also mother-in-law, and elder-sisters-in-law (Palmer, 1985, Gulati, 1993).

¹⁰ Human resources are knowledge, skill, creativity and imagination (op.cit)

¹¹ Within a social stratification perspective, class consists of a group of people sharing the same position or status in the system. In the context of rural perspective, society, class differentiation is conceptualised in

Tasks and roles assigned in household level also reflect and extend to community level. While men often have community leadership role which they organise in the formal and political level, women often have a community management role based on the provision of collective reproduction in religious services, festivals and so on. Thus, reproductive role of women tends to be seen as 'natural', nonproductive, and are not valued (Moser, 1989:1801). Men's community work, on the other hand, are either directly paid, or indirectly benefit them through status and political power (op.cit).

In relation to economy and market level, as it has mentioned above, while women are related to reproductive spheres and are tend to be locked in low paid jobs or under paid for equal work, men are identified as breadwinners and therefore get various forms of institutional support such as credit, training, information, and other job related experience.

There are jobs that are assigned to women and men. While women are generally crowded into domestic service, textiles, restaurants, petty trading, sexual services, men have wider range of opportunities for formal waged employment. Moreover, women tend to get few opportunities for advancement through either seniority or promotion than men (Young, 1993:71). Even when women have equal qualification, they still encounter social/cultural constraints (Carr et al, 1996, Chen, 1995:37-57, Dasgupta 1987 in Kabeer 1999). Consequently, as seen from the gender division of labour, most of these roles and tasks assigned for women systematically reproduces the disadvantaged and subordinated position of women.

2.1.2.2. Gender Division of Resources

Besides the activities and roles that are assigned between/within the genders, it is important to know who has the access and control of the resources. 'Access' is defined as the opportunity to make use of the resource and 'control' as the power to decide how a

terms of the determinants of differences in farm size, land ownership, farm income, etc (lecture notes, Meynen, 1987).

resource is used, and who has access to it. Women often have access but no control (March et al., 1999:18). Resources here can vary from food, health care, education, credit, waged employment, and land. For instance, when food is scarce, women and girls tend to be discriminated (Agarwal, 1986). Women are thought to need less food even in cases that they need more energy. Especially, women need more energy when they are pregnant and lactating. In many countries, male have wider opportunity to gain higher education which could lead males to have more access to waged employment than women. In cases that women undertake disproportionately large share of agricultural land, they do not have correspondingly control of the land and household income. In relation to land, a case study on Toba Batak women in Indonesia showed that though women were the main cultivators of land and relied their livelihoods on land, they were not allowed to own the land by the customary law (Rodenburg, 1997). Therefore, women have no say when suddenly the husband or the son who owns the land decides to sell it. These unequal gender division of resources constructs the subordinated position of women within gender relations.

2.1.2.3. Gender Division of Space

In many countries women's mobility is restricted. Cases from Latin America show that women should remain home, or only travel short distances or, only travel at certain hours of the day (Young, 1993: 102). Meaning that there are restriction in both time and space. Spatial restriction in part derive from the responsibility in reproductive work such as looking after the children and the elders. It also derives from fears surrounding women's sexuality and the desire to restrict or control it (op.cit). Regardless of the distance, there are also acceptable places and unacceptable places for women. Some places can be acceptable if there are male companions. Studies of Morgan and Niraula in Nepal (1995:552 in Kabeer, 1999a:21), showed that women could go to visit health care centers, local markets and relatives' houses but not cinemas. This can be explained that women are not encouraged to go to places for entertainment that would gather many people. While men are encouraged to be adventurous and expand their network, women are encouraged to be submissive and stay at home from the early stages of life (Young, 1993:102). This translates to rigorous restriction of women's mobility. Restriction of

mobility in time and space can also lead to excluding women from working for formal waged employment or participating in important political gatherings set at night. Such restrictions inhibit women from developing their potential ability.

2.1.2.4. Gender Division of Authority and Decision Making Power

In most societies, men and women have their own areas of responsibility and authority. It is common to find certain areas of decision making that are reserved for men in their capacity as household heads and others assigned to women in their capacity as mothers, wives and daughters (Kabeer, 1999:18). The context of decision making differs from the context of communities but generally, decision making in major economic or political issues is largely reserved for men, and women are often excluded.

As from above, it can be seen that women are systematically put into a disadvantaged position in the unequal gender relations. However, simply changing the unequal gender division of labour, resource, space and authority, do not solve the unequal gender relations unless the ideology of men's superiority change. It is because gender ideology influences unequal gender relations, and unequal gender relations legitimise and reinforce gender ideology. Cases of Britain and former USSR showed that when women took all-male-profession, it only resulted in people seeing these professions feminised and devalued (Young, 1993:155). Rodenburg's (1997) study on Toba Batak women in Indonesia also showed that even when women become capable of taking agricultural jobs that were mainly men's domain, as the result of feminisation process, agriculture was devalued in the area.

What makes the issue of change difficult is that gender ideology is rooted very deeply not only in men but also in women's perception. If women do not have critical consciousness in looking at the gender ideology, no change would be accrued for women's benefit. In many countries, women are brought up to be selfless than men, less ruthless, less experimental and daring from very early age (Young, 1993:123). Women who were brought up under these conditions may easily internalise their social status as persons of less value. This perception of women themselves also reinforces the existing gender

relations and gender ideology. Thus, not only positive changes in existing gender divisions but ideology also need to be changed, and corollary the subordinated position of women within gender relations.

2.2. Methodology of Field Research

In order to look at the changes of gender relations caused by male overseas migration, this paper relies on interviews with the 50 women¹² whose husband are/were overseas migrants, government officials, village heads, and elders and other villagers in Kudjab District, Udon Thani Province. The methodology used was a combination of one to one interview and focus group discussion using semi-structured interview technique. Udon Thani, aside from being the biggest manpower exporting province was chosen because the researcher lived there for four years and Kudjab District was where the researcher worked with women groups for two and a half years. The researcher went to the villages in August 2001 and stayed there for a month. The interviews were conducted through questionnaire¹³ in Thai language except in cases when women were extremely shy and could only speak in their own dialect. In this case, several friends came together for the interview. The length of the interview varied from 15 minutes to an hour depending on what they had to say. After finishing individual interviews, the researcher did three group meetings with five to six women going through the same questions just to re-check the findings of the previous interviews and see if there would be any changes if it were a group discussion. The selection was done by starting from women who the researcher have worked with, and then visited households randomly. In one village, the researcher went to a funeral and randomly met the interviewees.

¹² See Annex 1.

¹³ See Annex 2.

Chapter 3 Gender Ideology in Rural Northeast Thailand

This chapter explores how gender ideology operates in villages of rural Northeast Thailand and how it determines gender relations. This chapter shows how several ideological elements such as kinship, religion, and residence pattern reshape gender relations. The chapter examines gender relations by categorising them to gender divisions of labour, resource, space and authority that define what are the appropriate role for each gender and what they are entitled to.

3.1. Cultural/traditional practices that constitute Gender Ideology

Gender ideology refers to cultural ideas and interpretations of the biological differences between men and women that shape the identities and roles ascribed to men and women. It also refers to shared ideas or beliefs that justify the interest of the dominant group or the dominant gender in this case men. In villages in rural Northeast Thailand, the prevailing ideology attributes distinct characteristics to the society and therefore define the gender relations.

The kinship system in the villages is matrifocal (Tantiwiramond, 1997:177). Kinship lineage evolves around the female members of related families. Under this system, the groom moves into his bride's family network, pays bride-wealth and serves as a labourer in the wife's family. In the past, married daughters and their husbands lived with the wife's parents until the married couple's children were old enough to aid in the housework and household activities. The couple was then free to establish their own household in the family compound. Under these circumstances, if the parents had several daughters, all the married couples would live together in the original house at the same time and would function as the basic subsistent unit (Pyne, 1994, Singhanetra-Renard and Prabhudhanitisarn, 1992:161). Today, though it is usually only the youngest daughter's family that resides with her natal home, 94 per cent of the women interviewees lived in their natal village and continued to work on the parental property even after they had moved out into separate households (cf. Yoddumern-Attig, 1992).

Being the dominant religion in the country, Buddhism is strongly rooted in the village life. Temples play the central role in the community life. Monks are highly respected and villagers offer them food every morning. While monks are all men and all men enter monkhood at least once in their lives, women cannot. It is because Theravada Buddhism believes that the individual is born as a woman because of one's inferior *karma*¹⁴ (Pyne, 1994:24). Therefore, a Thai woman elevates her status and improves her inferior *karma* by being a responsible daughter, a reliable and supportive wife, and a nurturing mother (op.cit).

3.2. Gender Relations

As explained in chapter 2, gender ideology and gender divisions define the roles and responsibilities between men and women. It also determines power relations such as who has claim, right, control over a certain resource and who is excluded. Since gender relations vary between regions, cultures, class, time, and so on, the following describes the dominant pattern of rural villages in Northeast Thailand.

3.2.1. Gender Division of Labour

Generally, women are responsible for household matters that include reproductive tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, taking care of the children and elderly, and farming. Men also do reproductive tasks as fixing the house, mending farming tools, and farming. Farming is the main source of livelihood and most of the villagers plant rice for their subsistence. During the farming season, both women and men would farm and the family¹⁵ is the labour unit. Heavy labour part such as ploughing the land is confined to men (Paranakian, 1984:275). Planting and harvesting rice are done jointly.

Religion as pointed in the previous section, plays a central role in the community. Women participate in cleaning the temple and taking care of the meals of the monks. Other main activities are festivals where women are put in charge of the food and

¹⁴ Karma means the law of cause and effect that propels the cycle of rebirth. If you have an inferior karma, it means that you have done something bad in the past life so you have to suffer and compensate in the present life (Pyne, 1994).

cleaning. Men are in charge of preparing the decoration and entertaining the guests. Besides religious or traditional rituals, there are community activities such as village committees, saving groups, farmer groups, housewife groups, youth groups, and village health volunteers¹⁶. These groups usually have the objective to manage and allocate their community resources. Women participate in these groups but if these groups were not women-specific, few women were in the position of leadership roles¹⁷. If they reach such positions they usually work either as secretaries or accountants who usually take notes in the meetings and count the money, thus having not much say or decision making power.

Though men are supposed to be primary income earners, women are also responsible to engage in productive tasks in order to support the family budget. Thai rural women have a long history of participation in economic activities (Paranakian, 1984:254, Osaki, 1999:451). Many women engage in construction jobs and work in larger farmer's land in slack season. Since the 1980s, though majority were boys, girls also went to Bangkok to work as factory workers after finishing primary or secondary school. These girls worked in factories such as electronics, textiles, processed foods and leather goods. Women consisted 60-80 per cent of these workers, and were the lowest paid group compared to men who do similar work (UNDP, 1999). Some of these men and women came back to the village to marry after saving money. After marriage, couples who decided to continue working in Bangkok leave their children to the wife's mother in the village and send remittances (Pyne, 1994:26-33). Most of the couples who decided to stay in the village could not get any wage employment. They became farmers and in slack seasons, they worked in big cities engaged in construction jobs, sugar cane cutting or fruit picking. The jobs that these farmers engaged were mainly unskilled labour work. Men were believed to earn more because they were physically stronger¹⁸. For example, sugar cane cutting was paid by the amount of how much they cut and in construction job, women would be paid only about 80 per cent of what is paid to men. Again in the village, though

¹⁵ When planting rice in women's natal home's paddy field, the extended family of the natal family is the labour unit and if one is planting rice in the husband's home's paddy field, the husband's extended family is the labour unit.

¹⁶ Most groups are organised with technical assistance from either governmental organisations or NGOs.

¹⁷ The leadership position of these organisations are mainly composed of president, vice-president, secretary, accountant and public relations.

the percentage is very low, men had more opportunities of jobs than that of women. Some poor men were hired as 'care takers' of local government institutions. They were required multiple tasks such as cleaning, driving, and mending buildings.

What could be seen from this section was the unequal divisions of labour that systematically put women into weak positions compared to men. Though both men and women were engaged in reproductive work, women's reproductive work was the type of work that has to be done daily compared to that of men's. These types of women's reproductive role extended to the roles in the community. Women participated in community activities but again they were attached to reproductive role and were excluded from village politics. Also in the market, though women were actively engaged in productive work as men, the latter had better job opportunities and were remunerated higher than women.

3.2.2. Gender Division of Resource

In all societies, as roles are assigned for each gender, resources are also assigned in who is entitled or excluded in access and control. Access and control of resources are linked to power and authority. The following describes the division of resources such as education, land, and income.

Education is one of the main issues in measuring gender equality. However, gender disparities in attending school was not seen in Northeast Thailand (UNDP, 1999, UNDP, 2000). It was because parents view education as long-term investment which helps assure that a child can obtain stable employment and the parents can benefit (Yoddumnern-Attig, 1992:20). Since it is the daughters who must take care of the parents when they get old as it is taught in the Buddhist teaching, acquiring education is important for women as well as men.

Land and property are divided equally among children regardless to sex (Paranakian, 1984:252, Pyne, 1994:20) but traditionally, sons have waved away their rights because

¹⁸ This was the comment from interviewees.

they would eventually get the land from their wife's family. However, nowadays, sons also started to inherit land from their natal family because the land is becoming scarce (Yoddumern-Attig, 1992, Pyne, 1994:32). The most common pattern seen today is that the youngest daughter inherits the house and the land of the family because she is supposed to take care of her parents.

It is generally the women who hold the household purse and the husbands request money when they need (Soonthorndhada, 1992:67). The family's bank account is also registered in the wife's name¹⁹. The researcher found out that 70 per cent of women interviewees controlled and managed the household money. However, when it came to households that are engaged in businesses or overseas migration that yield certain amount of money, it was the men who controlled the money and women who managed the money²⁰. Therefore, one cannot always claim that women have the ultimate control of the household income.

As stated above, resources such as education and land were equal to men but one can see that it was only equal so that women can take care of the parents when they become old. Meaning that the women are locked into the ideology that they must be good responsible daughters taking care of their parents. In addition, the role of household purse makes women responsible for the household matters. But, if the amount of money becomes more than fulfilling the household needs such as buying daily food and paying children's school fee, women lose control of it. From these facts, one can see that as long as women are attached to households, they would have access to some resources. However, if not, they may lose the access as well.

3.2.3. Gender Division of Space

Despite the equality in terms of attending schools, girls' mobility is restricted from the time they reach school age. Parents restrict their mobility for the fear that their daughters

¹⁹ Most of the interviewees' bank account had the wife's name. However, when the interviewer expressed surprise, these women laughed saying that it was not a big deal because they do not have much to save.

²⁰ 'Control' over income indicates who makes the policy decisions as to how intra-household resources are to be located and who is to benefit while 'management' entails the translation of policy decision into practice (Pahl in Kabeer, 1997:265)

will be enticed or forced into premarital sex. Even if premarital sex does not occur, gossip in the community concerning the 'loose' behaviour of the adolescent daughter will indirectly affect the parents' moral standing within the community (Pramualratana, 1992:50). Two women in their forties who had teenage daughters mentioned that sons can go anywhere but they wanted their daughters to be near them. They were afraid that their daughters would be in trouble away from home since the outside world is dangerous for young women. In addition to that, they wanted their daughters to stay close to look after them when they get old. On the other hand, boys have a different form of socialisation. For young male, going out with friends, and to develop and expand his circle of friends are encouraged because it is seen that these circles would expand the network for their future work and in village politics. This is how men build their social ties and information system.

Among all the women interviewees, 44 per cent of women had work experience out of the village compared with 100 per cent of their husbands. Those women who had worked out of the village were accompanied by fathers or male kin when they were single and with husbands after they were married. There were quite a number of women who wanted to work overseas but the husbands did not allow them. When asked why, most of the women answered that the husbands fear that they would misbehave.

In the villages where the researcher conducted the interview, no women were members of the village committee which is the main and the most important organisation that makes decision of the whole village. Strikingly, three village leaders who were all men said that the ability of women and men were the same but that women cannot attend meetings held late at night. When they were asked why the women could not attend meetings late at night they answered that the husbands did not allow the wives to attend. When asked again why the husbands did not allow that, they answered that there was a possibility that women will fall in love with the other male members and misbehave.

As seen from the above, there is an underlying assumption that if women was not accompanied by men, it is dangerous or the women would misbehave. Despite

disapproving men's attitudes in seducing women, the ideology restricts the women's spatial division. These perceptions were seen from both men and women. This again would legitimise that women cannot gain formal waged employment or participate in village politics that reinforces their subordination.

3.2.4. Gender Division of Authority and Decision making Power

Authority and decision making power are also distributed between men and women. However, there are hierarchies in the power allocation. At the age of late teens and early twenties, women get married. Generally, women choose their own spouses, decide when and how many children they want to have (Pyne, 1994:22, Paranakian, 1984:251, Yodmnern-Attig, 1992:32). This was 100 per cent proved from the interviewees. However, they did not have choice not to marry. They had to marry because marriage itself raises the status of women and it is only after delivering a child that women are treated as adults (Pyne, 1994). Wives are responsible for household matters and therefore makes most of the household related decisions. On the other hand, men are responsible for extra-household matters as politics and administration (Yodmnern-Attig, 1992:17). Though women are in charge of household matters, the household heads are usually men. When the household contains three generations, it is either the husband or wife's father who becomes the household head. Familial authority in Thailand is usually passed from father to the son-in-law (Pyne, 1994:22).

Compared to other cases in rural communities, these women seem to have more decision making power because they can choose their spouses and decide how many children they want to have which is directly related to their well-being. However, since they have to marry to fulfill the role of supportive wife and caring mother, this choice is questionable. Division of authority again put women in subordinated place. As stated above, women are in charge of household but men are perceived to be household heads. Men are also in charge of extra-household matters and participate in politics and administration which women are often excluded. Consequently, the ideology that attaches women to the household without control put women into subordinated position.

3.3. How men and women look at gender relations

From the literature and interviews, women appeared to have heavier working load both engaged in reproductive and productive work and were excluded from major decision making roles. Gender ideology justifies the situation systematically putting women in disadvantaged positions in all four categories of gender divisions.

In order to know how the villagers perceive these situations, the researcher asked the women interviewees if they feel whether there are inequalities between men and women. Most women said 'not much'. Imposing the question of whether they would choose to be women or men in their next lives, despite the Buddhist teaching of *karma*, 66 per cent of the women answered that they wanted to be a woman. 26 per cent wanted to be a man, and 8 per cent of the women said they did not mind. The reason for choosing to be a woman was separated in two reasons. Among the women who chose to be a woman, 55 per cent of them explained that men had to work harder to earn money and have more responsibility than women. These women also recognised that they themselves also earn money in addition to the daily reproductive work but they said that women's work was lighter and said that women could stay at home but men must go out and earn money. Among the women who chose to be a woman, 21 per cent of them explained that they did not want to be men because men are dirty, drink alcohol, smoke and are not trustworthy. On the other hand, when the same question was asked to men, most of them answered that they wanted to be men again. They explained that the life of a man is more comfortable because they just have to work outside and earn income. When the researcher said, "Many women said that the men have a heavier task.", these men replied that, "Maybe the men's work is heavier but at some point it finishes. Women's work itself can be light but there is no end. Women have to cook, clean, wash, and raise the children even after they work outside." When the researcher asked why don't the husbands help, both women and the men replied that it is the women's task.

However when the question was asked by raising examples of what they do in their daily lives compared to men, some women started to talk. The main frustration was that women's mobility was restricted while men can go anywhere when they want to. They

said that if women do something that does not fit the image of good caregivers, people would turn them to a subject of gossip. They also mentioned that men are socially accepted to have lovers outside marriage but not women. These frustrations were mainly about inequalities in gender division of space and the ideology that lock women to be good and care giving women. They even said that in case women violate the norms, they would be punished while men would not be punished even they did the same thing. What can be understood from these perceptions are that ideology plays a big role in accepting men to have relatively freedom in doing things and seen that they work harder and the work is tougher. In reality the work load was about the same or in some cases women may even work harder. As stated above, not only men but also women share the same gender ideology. While some men are aware of their privileged position as seen from the above reply, some women do not notice their deprivation.

Compared to other patrilineal societies, gender relations of the poor rural women in Northeast Thailand can be said to be relatively better. First, most of the women live in their natal community meaning that they are accustomed and know most of the people in the community which gives them some kind of social protection. Second, there is no customary law that prohibits women to own properties or to inherit assets. These factors contribute in decreasing women's insecurity and strengthens women's fall-back position. However, the ideology that require women to be submissive and caring, many gender divisions put women into subordinated status. In terms of gender division of labour, both men and women do the reproductive work such as farming, but women do most of the reproductive work inside the house. Women also participated in community activities, but were excluded from decision making roles. Both men and women were engaged in economic activities but women were paid lower for equal job and there were more job opportunities for men. In terms of gender division of resource, though education and land was equally distributed, it was in a way to give the daughters incentive to secure the lives of their parents. Income was managed and controlled by women, but once the amount was large, men started to control. In terms of gender division of space, women were not only restricted or excluded from certain places but also from time. Constraints in the mobility restrict or/and exclude participation in village politics, access to wider

social circles, and opportunity to develop and use their capabilities. Men on the other hand were encouraged to expand their social circles and cultivate their potential ability, and had more options in developing themselves. In terms of gender division of authority and decision making power, women's decision making responsibilities were restricted in managing daily household matters but were not household heads and were excluded from village politics. In all of these gender divisions, the ideology that women must be responsible daughters, supportive wives and caring mothers, reproduced the unequal gender relations that put the women in subordinated position. The next chapter explores whether male overseas migration can provide an opportunity for women to change the existing unequal gender relations stated in this chapter.

Chapter 4 Findings from the Field Research

This chapter aims to give an overall view of changes in gender relations brought by male overseas migration to the women left behind in Kudjab District. The chapter aims to articulate the response of 50 women interviewees who had/have their husbands working overseas. It also questions if there are seeds for empowerment.

4.1. Gender Relations During the Husband's Absence

While the husbands were overseas, there were changes in women's lives. It is easy to understand because if there were roles and responsibilities assigned to each gender, eventually there must be changes. However, the degree may change and vary depending on kinship and household structure. For instance, if one lives in an extended family with adult males in the household, the impact of the husband's absence may not be big. Cases in patrilineal societies such as India (Gulati, 1993), Pakistan (Palmer, 1985) and Yemen (op.cit) showed that during the absence of the husband, some of the wives had to live under the protection of husband's in-laws. In these cases, changes in gender relations may not be seen much because the male kin may take over the roles that the husband used to take. In the case of 50 women interviewees, only 6 women lived in their parent's house. All of these women were the youngest or the only daughter in the family living only with their parents and not with other families. The rest lived in a nuclear house but in their natal village. The average size of both extended and nuclear family was five. The following are the changes brought by the husband's overseas migration.

4.1.1. Gender Division of Labour

As discussed in chapter 3, before the husband's migration, women were responsible for household matters and were heavily engaged in both reproductive and productive tasks. All except six women said that they had more free time while their husbands were away. Among these six women, five women did not receive any remittances from the husband and one woman had to use her husband's remittances for the school fee for her smaller brothers to go to secondary school. The remaining 44 who said that their free time increased was because their work burden both in reproductive and productive spheres

decreased. The amount of reproductive activity decreased simply because they did not have to cook or wash the clothes for one adult. Raising children without the husband was not an issue because anyway the husbands did not take a major role in child rearing and it was the wife's mother who helped. Farming was continued except for two women. The amount of productive activity also decreased because they no longer had to work as construction workers or contract farmers in slack season because of remittances. For instance, two women said that when their husbands were in the village, they had to wake up at three in the morning, go to the forest to get bamboo shoots, mushrooms and various vegetables. Then, they would go to the market to sell. When the husbands were overseas, they no longer had to do that task because enough remittances were sent for daily expenses. But still, 62 percent of women engaged in productive work. However, these women quit heavy manual work such as agricultural job for larger farmers, construction jobs or food selling (described above). Instead, they started engaging in jobs such as tailor, factory worker in Bangkok, or participating in women's income generating groups. On the other hand, six women said that they were having harder life when their husbands were overseas, because women did all kinds of work available that affected their well-being.

The changes show that those who received sufficient amount of remittances had acquired more time for themselves compared to when the husbands were home. This can be explained because most of the women lived in a rather smaller household size such as five. However, on the other hand, if the husband did not send the money, all the burden went on the wife's shoulder. However, what is significant here is that 88 per cent of women quit heavy manual labour. 62 per cent of the women who continued earning income changed their type of job. In these cases, it led women to acquire new skills that eventually expanded their resource not only in income and material resources but also in social and human resource.

4.1.2. Gender Division of Resource

90 per cent of the women increased their access to more income because of the husband's remittances. The remaining 10 percent were the five women that did not receive any

money. Among the women who were receiving remittances, 93 per cent were receiving the remittances directly. There were two cases that the husband was sending money to the wife's father and one case that the husband was sending it to his mother. This was because these couples were newly married and did not have their own house and lived with their parents. The case that the husband was sending to his mother was that the wife was living with his mother and the father was dead. All women except the five who did not receive remittances and the one who had to use the husband's remittances for her brothers' education said that their access to more income made their lives improve. Most of the women bought kitchen utensils, beds, closets, refrigerators and televisions. In cases where the children were in the age of secondary school, the remittances were used for their tuition. Children of all interviewees (except the five women) that had their children in the age of secondary school at least finished junior secondary level which otherwise was nearly impossible without the remittance. 50 per cent of their children in the age above 18 went to college or university.

Farming, especially rice planting was the main source of livelihood in this area. Therefore, the researcher thought that there must be a big impact when the husband was absent. However, from the interviews, though two women mentioned the increase of expenditure of hiring labour and three women complained about the difficulties of supervising hired labour, others said that there was no problem. There was no problem because they were farming with their relatives. Those who farm within their nuclear family also said that it was not a problem because they could hire male kin or male neighbour for the preparation of land. For planting and harvesting, six cases showed that the women whose husband were absent helped each other. If one helps in the other's field for five days, the women gets five days of help from the women she helped. Cases in Botswana (Brown, 1983) and Lesotho (Palmer, 1985) showed the difficulties in continuing the farming while the husband was absent because of lack of male labour. For example in the case of Lesotho, most of the able-bodied men were gone as migrants and father-in-law could be too old. It was also mentioned that male kin of the husband who usually were the one's to help, the ties got weaker as the husband's were away for long. The nature of matrifocal and matrilocal system was advantageous for the rural women in

the villages of Northeast Thailand because male kin for them means their own relatives and not the husband's, which makes it easier to manage. It is also easy for them to find labour because they already have the community network since they lived in their natal community.

In addition to household matters, women started to participate in workshops, seminars, or women group activities funded by local government institutions and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Through these activities women expanded their social circle and increased their access to information.

4.1.3. Gender Division of Space

As stated in the previous section, most of the women expanded their access to more resources. In relation to this, their social space also increased. Six women went to adult learning school to acquire secondary education. These women said they enjoyed acquiring new knowledge and making new friends. Adult learning school not only provided school curriculums but also held workshops as 'hair cutting' and 'sewing'. With various information coming in, women were able to participate in other activities expanding their social circle and capabilities. 26 women participated in 'income generating women's group' that exist in every villages promoted by government organisations. These income generating groups were funded by government and in some cases by NGOs. These organisations provided workshops, training, and funds in order to develop skills and generate income. These women entered the group because they wanted to earn income to support their household without doing heavy manual work, meaning that they still wanted income besides the remittance but were not that desperate to engage in heavy labour. These women also had time and energy to devote working in groups that require time for meetings and discussions (cf. Chant, 1992:64, Mayoux, 1995:235). Among these women, three started a small tailor shop in their house. Besides women working within the village, there were four women who went to Bangkok to work. The significance here is that they did not go to Bangkok because they had to support their family but wanted to know how the life in Bangkok was, and they went with their friends without being accompanied by their husbands or male kin.

However, husbands' absence did not expand the gender division of space to everybody. There was one case that the woman had to close her motorcycle repairing business from the fear that if she worked alone, people would take advantage of her such as stealing the tools or visiting her late at night. Five women complained that when the husbands were with them, they could go outside the village together with the husbands anytime they wanted to. If they went out with friends, the neighbours would gossip as they were misbehaving. This implicates that for some women the absence of husband expanded their capabilities and mobility, but for some women, though their husbands were away, they were still under the rigid gender ideology through the eyes of their neighbours. As a whole, whether spending their time in adult learning school or group activities, or at home, women became less isolated because they tend to spend more time with friends and kin for practical and social reasons (cf. Chant, 1992:65, Gulati, 1993).

4.1.4. Gender Division of Authority and Decision Making Power

Except for the three cases that the husband was sending the remittance directly to the wife's father or the husband's mother, all women were managing and being responsible for the family matters. Though most of the remittances sent for the first year disappeared repaying the debts, money sent for the second year entered to the household budget unless there was something wrong with the working conditions overseas²¹. Besides household commodities, five women bought sewing machines and three started a small tailor in the village.

As stated earlier, all the women except two were farming. Three said that it was a burden to hire men because they only did the tasks required such as to plough the land or to plant the rice. They did not help to carry tools for farming or carry the food to eat in the farm. These women also mentioned that they had to take 'good' care of them to ensure that they would do good job because hired labourers may not care about quality of the work done for somebody else's farm. These cases show the lack of women exercising

²¹ Some got work that was low paid than the contract. Some had no jobs when they reached the destination.

authority over men which again relates with the ideology that women must be submissive and are not in the position to supervise men.

However, there was also a significant change in women participating formally in community activities. 13 women (26 per cent) whose husband's were working overseas started holding some kind of leadership positions in this area. Among the 13 women, 6 women were 'village health volunteers' that were now mostly women though it was composed of both men and women when the system started in 1977. The main reason for this was that men in their twenties to forties were not reliable because one never knows when the man would migrate. In addition to the increase of women health volunteers, the "Village Fund"²² which was the latest development scheme allocated in every village, had half of the committee members from women. It was because the new Prime Minister Thaksin encouraged to give half of the Committee member seats to women. 8 women out of the 50 interviewees were chosen to be committee members. 5 out of the 8 women were the women who actively participated in women's group activities when their husbands were overseas.

Though it was not for all women, considerable changes were seen in women expanding their capabilities during the husbands' absence. Some changes were accelerated by participating in activities outside the household and some changes were supported by the government policies. However, as seen from above, positive changes in one dimension of gender division may improve and expand other dimensions of gender division. On the other hand, as seen from the women who had suffered during the husband's absence they suffered even more from the lack of resources.

4.2. Gender Relations After the Husband's Return

This section presents issues that changed after the husband's return. It looks if the women's expansion in the existing gender divisions were maintained or not. It also looks

²² Prime Minister Thaksin elected in 2001, implemented the 'Village Fund Programme' as an investment source to create supplementary employment for people in the community and support small household enterprises. Each village has its own board to handle one-million-baht (The Government Public Relations Department, 2001).

whether new changes occurred. Then, it explores whether there were seeds for women's empowerment from the overall process.

4.2.1. Gender Division of Labour

In many cases, though overseas migration enabled to buy household commodities and reform or rebuild the house, it was difficult for these men to invest in something that can increment their earnings. Cases that the husbands did/could not invest in small business, after their savings were gone, they became poor again and returned to the life style they had before²³. Under this condition, usually the gender division of labour goes back to the situation before the husband's migration. However, in many cases, husbands repeat overseas migration. Among the husbands of the 50 interviewees, 66 per cent worked overseas for more than twice. Among those who have only gone once, about 90 per cent were still in the age of twenties to middle thirties so they have high possibilities that they would go more times.

There were four couples that started small businesses such as vegetable/fruit gardening, pig raising and making noodles. In these four cases, no couple invested in their housing but invested in starting up businesses. One of the businesses that were invested 14 years ago became successful and continues until today. 10 years after starting the business, the couple succeeded in building a house and bought a second-hand car to expand their business. After buying the car, she made sweets and fruit juice and the husband delivered them to nearby towns.

The remaining three cases have started the business in the last two years, so the status for these families in the community have not yet risen. However, these couples said that they were happy because at least they have work everyday and do not have to work for others. For these couples, they had to work more hours and had to acquire new knowledge and skills. Though starting up of these businesses was the husband's idea, buying inputs, production process, marketing and selling were all done jointly. Therefore, it may have the potential of women expanding decision making capabilities

²³ Aknit et al. who did a survey on 300 families that had overseas migrant discusses the same issue (2000).

outside the household matters which can lead to cooperation of husband and wife in both productive and reproductive spheres that may lead to a more fair gender relations (See the case of L.C. in Chapter 5).

4.2.2. Gender Division of Resources

The income level decreased after the husband's return but commodities they bought have remained. Most of the household bought televisions. Televisions may also play a big role in increasing women's knowledge and information. Through television programmes, in the long run women would be able to speak Thai language that is different from their dialect. This language issue was actually one of the reasons that inhibited women to go outside their villages or to speak out in public because they were ashamed of their lack of language ability that took away their confidence.

4.2.3. Gender Division of Space

Some women who enjoyed increase of mobility while the husband's absence, in some cases women had to go back to their boundaries before the husband's migration. It was because they became busy doing household work and had to take again heavy manual work to support the household. Besides physical reasons, there were also women who were compelled back to their traditional gender division of space and started having conflicts. Four women who went to work in a factory in Bangkok came back when their respective husbands arrived. However, there were women who negotiated with their husband and still continued their activities after the return of the husband. For women whose husband invested in business expanded their division of space by going to markets, visiting customers with their newly acquired motorcycles.

4.2.4. Gender Division of Authority and Decision Making Power

Wives respected their husband that they were able to manage working overseas. For those who started doing business, new dimensions may be seen in the future. The significance of division of authority was that women started to appear in village politics deciding the allocation of community resources. Though it was partly encouraged by the Prime Minister's policy, some women were chosen from those who had actually developed their capabilities during the husband's absence.

4.3. Seeds for Empowerment

As shown above, changes in each of the gender divisions varies between each women. However as shown in table 1, 68 per cent of women made or were made to take actions to develop themselves.

(Table 1) Women's Participation in Activities Outside the Homesteads

income generating group activities	small business	leadership roles	adult learning school	no. of women (total 50)
✓	✓	✓	✓	3
✓	✓	✓		2
✓	✓			2
✓		✓		5
✓			✓	2
✓		✓		12
	✓	✓		1
	✓			4
		✓		2
			✓	1
				16

(Four women who went to Bangkok is included in small business)

All women who participated in the women's income generating group or went to adult learning school talked about positive changes in their inner-self. How they started looking on issues out of their homesteads, learning to cooperate with women outside their kin or neighbourhoods, and how they could share the same problems they faced. Most of them said that before participating in these activities, they were scared of the government officials but now they could speak to them and express what they think (cf. Kabeer 1998:65). Particularly women who participated in income generating group said that they learned how to think, plan and how to use time productively. Women who started taking active roles in the women's group increased their voice. Five women who took active roles in women's group started taking leadership positions in village-level non-women-specific organisations. Three women started a tailor and four women went to work in Bangkok. What is significant here is that they went to work not primarily to support the household but to have a new experience which is a change in inner-self of wanting to

develop and use their capabilities. It is through these activities that women gain recognition for their potential and is an entry point to gain leadership titles in the communities if they do not have wealth. The longer the husband's length of migration, there are more women who participate in these activities outside their homesteads (see Annex 1).

Another issue that must be focused is women's awareness in gender inequalities. Five women complained that if they went somewhere while the husbands were absent, the neighbours would gossip as if they were misbehaving. One woman recognised the inequalities when she had to close her business regardless to her skill but because she needed male protection. On the other hand, women who enjoyed their expanded gender division while the husband's absence, started to have conflicts when the husbands restrict them. However, some women managed to negotiate and overcame the problem. Thus, male overseas migration can bring seeds for women's empowerment, which are 'to recognise deprivation (be aware of gender inequality)' and 'develop and use their capabilities'. One can claim that these awareness may existed before the husband's migration but, the awareness of gender inequality or developing capabilities and exercising it became more evident when women had extra time and tried to do something crossing the existing gender divisions and ideology.

Chapter 5 Life Stories of Six Women

This chapter examines six life stories of rural women and tries to explore the complexity of gender relations in the household where the man and the woman live under the same roof sharing concerns and experiences interwoven by 'self-interest and altruism, co-operation and conflict' (Kabeer, 1997:300). This chapter aims to capture the processes of changes in gender relations and whether it contributes to women's empowerment by focusing on women's agency. The six cases cannot be said as representing cases for the 50 women interviewees but they were chosen because it illustrates the changes brought by husband's overseas migration and women's agencies for over some period of time of their lives.

5. 1. Developed capabilities : The case of L.C.

L.C. is 29 years old and has two children and lives with her parents. After finishing her primary education, she farmed and went to the cities for construction work every slack season with her parents until she married at the age of 17. After marriage, she continued farming in her parents and her husband's family land. She also worked in larger farmers' land and construction site to earn income. After bearing her second child, her husband went to Israel. While her husband's absence, she farmed with her parents and stopped taking construction job. She said she was physically fine because she did not have to take any construction job but mentally stressed. The first year, she worried if her husband can repay the debt, and the second year she worried about her husband's health. After the return of the husband, they decided to use the money for starting a small business. Most of the neighbours and friends who had migrated overseas used their money in non-productive goods such as reforming or constructing a new house, buying TV and stereo, but they bought a tractor and agricultural inputs. While most of the migrants repeat going overseas, the husband says it is not worth because most of the people are stressed for repaying the debts and can gain short term wealth. L.C. agrees and plants vegetables and fruits in their paddy and started to sell their products in the market with the husband. Though it does not yield much income in a short term, and

have to work for more hours, L.C. and the husband are happy having their own work. In the market, she gets information about what sells well and what kind of technique is needed. Now she spends most of her time with her husband sharing the same quantity and quality of work in the business. (Before this, they used to work in construction site together but the task allocated differed from women to men) All the decision making regarding to business is done together. Since most of the productive work is done together, the husband helps more with the domestic tasks as preparing food and taking care of the children. The husband says men's work finishes after coming back home but women's work does not finish. Now, that the burden of productive work is completely equal, the husband felt it was unequal of him to make L.C. do the housework alone.

The case of L.C. shows positive changes in gender relation. Her expansion in gender division of labour taking a major role in business increased her mobility by going to the market buying agricultural inputs, negotiating, and selling food. These activities corresponded with more access in resources such as information, knowledge and network. With the equal participation and equal capabilities in business, the husband started to notice the unequal burden of women and started to take household tasks that used to be L.C.'s domain.

5. 2. Developed capabilities and struggled to use: The case of K.P.

K.P. is 32 years old. She was born in a farmer's house and went to school until the 6th year of primary school. She married at the age of 18 and her husband was 23. Every slack season, the couple worked in construction site in cities. After having two children, the husband went to Taiwan for two years as a construction worker. During the husband's absence, K.P. went to adult learning school and got a junior secondary school degree. She participated in 'sewing workshop' funded by the school and bought a sewing machine with the remittance and started to participate in income generating women's group supported by the local government. Soon, with her relatively high educational background and mobility, she became an active member of the group.

Upon the arrival of the husband, K.P. for the first time got a land and built a house. They also bought cows, motorcycle, TV, stereo, and a refrigerator. The relation between K.P. and the husband was good for a short while because they enjoyed shopping and she respected her husband being able to tolerate working in a foreign country. However, conflict started to emerge when the husband ordered her to quit women's group because she was not always at home and, as well, he did not like male government officials visiting her. K.P.'s mobility was restricted and she did everything to please her husband so that she could continue her role in the group. Soon, the husband got sick and was unable to move. He had to allow K.P. to participate in the women's group which became the primary source of income. However, he annoyed K.P. by getting drunk. K.P., by gradually manipulating without direct confrontation, managed to build a small space in the corner of their house so that other members could gather, sew things, and communicate. In this way, she could stay in the house for long hours, instead of sewing or holding meetings outside the homestead. Through this processes, K.P.'s husband also started to notice the importance of her role in the group and started to cook and take care of the children when K.P. was busy and not at home.

Now, it is three years after the husband's return from Taiwan. K.P. manages and controls the household budget. Outside home, she takes leadership position in the group and is also a committee member of the Village Fund that determines how the village money should be used. She is very proud of this and wants to eliminate corruption from the village politics. Her husband who now fully supports her even makes jokes like "Are you trying to be the village head?" However, K.P.'s financial situation is not good. Though she earns money from sewing, she is worried of not having enough money for the two children to attain secondary education. She wants them to become civil servants which means they need a college degree. Now that her husband cannot work outside but takes the reproductive tasks, she is thinking of working overseas.

K.P., during the husband's absence, enjoyed more free time and developed her capabilities by participating in activities outside the homestead which required negotiation and cooperation of people outside her community such as government

officials. However, after the return of the husband, the husband started to restrict her mobility. In order to maintain her role in the women's group, she tried to please the husband by shouldering more work in productive and reproductive task within the traditional gender division of labour. By chance, her husband got ill, and only then he started to recognise K.P. as a respectable partner that he started taking reproductive tasks that K.P. used to take. With the help of her husband, she became more active in activities outside the homestead increasing income, social resources and human resources. Positive changes in gender relations were seen as the husband started supporting her. Though the husband's migration was not the direct cause of positive changes, it indeed triggered. It was the remittance that enabled K.P. to go to adult learning school, enabled her to buy sewing machine which is her main tool for earning income, and enabled her to build a space for group work which she enjoys taking the leadership role.

5. 3. Developed capabilities and gave up :The case of C.C.

C.C. is 36 years old and has two children. She studied until fourth year of primary school. She stayed in the village doing housework and farming until she got married when she was 19 years old. Unlike other women, she lived with the husband's mother. C.C. says that she had literary nothing until the husband went to Brunei after four years of marriage. The remittance was sent to the mother of the husband and C.C. had to ask her for the daily expense. Upon the return of the husband, they built a little house next to his mother's house and C.C.'s nuclear family moved out from the mother-in-law house. Staying in the village for two years, the husband went to Taiwan. This time, the remittance was sent directly to her. With the remittance, she bought kitchen utensils, furniture, a television and a refrigerator. After two years, her husband returned but went to Taiwan again the next year. Then, C.C. bought a motorcycle, land for the housing and paddy field. It was then when she started participating in government-run development projects. Her high mobility with the motorcycle and having time to spend for these activities, she soon became an active member. She said it was interesting going to other provinces for seminars and workshops with government officials, and learning new knowledge and skills. As her social network expanded, she started using money for outing and entertaining her friends. After the husband's third return, he was surprised

with the wife having a society out of the village. He started to restrict her mobility and conflict emerged. The husband rested for a year in the village and went to Taiwan again. Now he only sends the amount of money he thinks would be sufficient for her and the children and keeps the rest of the money for himself. C.C. tired of confronting with her husband, and with budget constraints, does not participate in community activities anymore except that she makes breakfast everyday for poor primary school students who cannot afford to eat. The budget for the food is allocated by the school but she does this task without being paid. She says though she quit participating in activities that require going outside the village, she still wants to contribute for the development of the village and that is why she volunteers to make school breakfast. She says she feels lonely that her husband has been away for more than 10 years and now that she has a house, land and children that go to high school, she wants her husband to come back and live a peaceful life.

C.C. who once came out of the boundaries of traditional gender division of labour and space, had to go back to a more restricted situation than before the husband's migration. when the husband noticed that she was violating her division of space and was violating her task as a household purse who should not spend money for her self-interest. C.C. confronted him but soon the household budget became under control of her husband which was once C.C.'s responsibility to save and allocate the money. Though the husband is physically absent, C.C.'s life is under control of him. She quit all the community activities except for the activity that satisfies the role as caring mother. Making breakfast for the poor children is the source of her self-worth. Her priority is good relationship with the husband and to maintain a good family. Her giving up of self-interest combined with concern of family welfare helps to sustain the unequal gender relations (cf. Sen, 1990:126). However, on the other hand there are also some possibilities that if this situation continues, the control of the husband may weaken and would enable her to regain her resources and mobility in the long run and have another strategy to pursue her self-interest.

5. 4. Kept struggling and survived: The case of N.P.

N.P. is 42 years old and was born in a farmer's house and went to school until the 4th year of primary school. She married at the age of 22. Her husband went to Brunei to pay the education fee for the two daughters. However, the husband did not send remittances so N.P. had to struggle alone to make ends meet. She sewed clothes as a contract worker, worked in other people's land digging cassava and planting rice. She joined the peanut processing women's group supported by the local government in order to earn more money. N.P. got in charge of delivering the processed peanuts to nearby towns because she knew how to ride a motorcycle and had high mobility. After two years, the husband came back without any money and went to Taiwan in order to repay the money he borrowed to work in Brunei. After two years of working in Taiwan, he was able to repay the debts. Then, to look for money for themselves, the husband went to Korea illegally and was caught in the airport. This time, N.P. had to sell all her land she inherited from her parents to repay the debt borrowed for the illegal commission fee to go to Korea. Left without any assets, N.P. got divorced and stole part of the fund of peanut processing group that was given from the local government. It is four years since then, and nobody in the community speaks to her. Now, she makes a living by selling peanut processing products using the skills and network she gained during participating in the women's group. She knew government officials that are engaged in side-business²⁴ and super market owners more than the other members of the peanut processing group because she was in charge of delivering the product when she belonged to the group. With the help of government officials and super market owners in the city that sympathised her life story, bought the same product from N.P. rather than buying it from the group. N.P.'s daughter goes to university with a scholarship and the second daughter and mother help in N.P.'s business.

The husband's migration brought N.P. not only more burden but also lost the land and the house. During the absence of her husband, she was engaged in any kind of work that would generate income. Though she had a hard time, she actually managed to expand her

²⁴ There are quite a few government officials engaged in side-business. They take the advantage of getting agricultural products cheaply from the farmers directly and sell it to bigger markets.

resource such as skill, information and social network by expanding her division of space. She survived through running her own business by stealing the money from the group she used to belong to. Stealing and divorce made her isolated from the community. It was also interesting that other women who were close to N.P. said that their husband prohibited them to talk with N.P. because of the fear that their wives would get 'bad' influence from her (cf. Chant, 1999:110). What can be seen from the case of N.P. is that she had to expand her capabilities by crossing most of the existing gender divisions to survive even she did not wanted to. Now, she has high degrees of income earning capabilities, business skills and spatial mobility. However, she is very much isolated from the community members which affect her in terms of well-being. Though her stealing is affecting her isolation, divorce and her aggressiveness which is not accepted in the gender ideology also reinforced her isolation.

5. 5. Empowered and achieved: The case of N.M.

N.M. is 36 years old and has one child. She was born in a farmer's house and went to school until the 4th year of primary school. She married at the age of 17. Her husband was 21. Three years later, the husband went to Bangkok to earn money. He worked as a guard in the Embassy of France for a year. Then he transferred to a fish factory near Bangkok but he quit in one month because many workers were addicted to drugs. After returning to village, he borrowed money from the moneylender and went to Singapore. He worked as a construction worker for two years. While he was in Singapore, N.M. participated in government-run seminars and workshops on issues of health and nutrition. She realised her ignorance and went to adult learning school to acquire secondary education which later she completed until 12th grade. It was also at this time when N.M. became the leader of the village women's group. After the husband returned from Singapore, they built a house. The husband stayed in the village for one year and went to Israel. This time he borrowed money from the bank with the house and the land as mortgage. He worked in a hotel for two years. He came back with some savings but all the money was spent for N.M.'s small brother's wedding. Soon after coming back from Israel, the husband went to Taiwan. He worked in a furniture company for two years. While the husband was in Taiwan, N.M. went to learn sewing technique to the

tailor nearby and bought a sewing machine. She also bought a motorcycle and land while the husband was in Taiwan. After the husband returned home, he bought chicken, fruit trees, and pigs to start a farm. However, in two years, all failed. Moreover, N.M.'s older sister got so many debts by gambling and N.M. had to sell their house and some part of their paddy field. Now the only source of income comes from N.M. sewing trousers at home as a contract worker. When the researcher went to interview, N.M. was very depressed and complained that all the money was disappearing and the husband was preparing to go to Brunei. She said she really wants her husband to go overseas again because one of the reasons of the money going out was the alcohol consumption of the husband and his friends. Her husband is a very social person, and that itself is not a problem but, many of his friends visit their home and she had to cook for them. The biggest pain was that she had to buy beer which is expensive. She said that she had to buy beer because everybody expects him to treat the guests with beer because he has worked overseas.

N.M. is now not only the leader of the village's women's group but also the representative at the District and Provincial level. She is also a committee member of the village fund and committee member of Udon Thani Province Development Group. The departure date of the husband was on the same day of the district level meeting. When N.M. asked her husband if she could go to the meeting, the husband said "You decide". N.M. went to the meeting but returned home early to be in time to send off her husband. However, when N.M. reached home, he had already left to Bangkok. When the researcher visited N.M.'s house for the second time, it was already three weeks after he left. N.M. thinks that he must have reached Brunei already but he has not called. N.M.'s daughter who is 15 year old is very much worried about her father not calling home.

N.M.'s wide network, high mobility, high decision making capabilities, and authority in the village have crossed the existing gender divisions. Her capabilities have much to do with her husband's migration. Her husband's remittances enabled her to develop her capabilities, buy sewing machine for source of income and motorcycle for higher mobility. N.M. is very much empowered in the sense that she chose to develop and used

her capabilities. However, her leadership role relies much on the remittances that she could have time for non-money-yielding activities and the daughter could go to secondary school. If the husband does not send the money, N.M. has to struggle for income which would impede her from taking leadership roles. Meaning, her situation contains risk when the husband's attachment to the family weakens.

5. 6. Struggled and defeated : The case of S.P.

S.P. is 40 years old. She was born in a farmer's house and went to school until the 4th year of primary school. She married at the age of 15. Her husband was 19. S.P. and her husband have farmed together until their only son had to go to junior high school. The husband went to Singapore to earn cash. While the husband was overseas, she farmed with her relatives. The work burden lessened but she missed her husband so much that she asked her husband to come back. The husband came back in a year despite the two year contract, just after he finished repaying the debt. The husband stayed in the village for three years farming but he had to go again because his son was entering vocational high school. This time S.P. did not miss her husband but enjoyed her freedom. She started participating in women's group attending workshops, going to cities selling crafts and processed food learned in the workshops with friends. She said that it was the best time of her life and her society expanded a lot through these activities. During the husband's absence, she bought a motorcycle, land, paddy, house, and paid the school fee for her son. It was after the return of the husband when the relationship between S.P. and her husband got worse. The husband started to complain the way how S.P. used the money without his permission. S.P. and her husband quarreled a lot over money issues and sometimes the husband hit her. Three years after, the husband went to Taiwan again to pay the tuition of the son's college. However, this time, the husband stopped sending all the money to S.P.'s bank account. Now that the son graduated from college and went to Taiwan, S.P. is left alone in the house. It was during this period that S.P. went to Bangkok and met a Japanese translator. This translator told her that she could go to Japan to work. S.P. paid 20,000 baht (about twice the amount of going to work in Taiwan) for the document from the Japanese government. Though many villagers warned her because these kind of stories are so typical and is fake because she said she

is not cheated because the translator is her new boyfriend and said, " All my life was ordered by people and I have been obeying what other people said. Now, I want my own money and my own life." By accident, when the researcher went to the village a month later, S.P. called from Bangkok to the village telephone service crying that she was cheated and she has no money left. When her best friend said to come back to the village, she said she cannot because she is ashamed.

The case of S.P. show that her increased freedom and her act against the required gender ideology increased the control of the husband. Since the husband controlled the money, she went to get wage work in the city but came back within a month. When her son went to Taiwan, she became very lonely and decided to go to Japan. S.P.'s case shows her struggles to get out of the boundaries of gender divisions but could not. Because of her violation of gender ideology, her position worsened in all dimensions and has strengthened to legitimise the gender ideology that if women violates their division of gender, they would be in trouble.

5. 7. Summary

These six life histories of rural women show varied gender relations affected by husband's overseas migration. The degree of impact differ depending on how the remittances were used, how the women spent while the husband's absence, how they related to the husband and the length of the time the couple was separated.

During the husbands' absence, all except N.P. stopped engaging in hard manual work such as construction jobs or farming in larger farmer's land. K.P. and N.M. continued to earn income by sewing. The rest were not engaged in income generating jobs though S.P. went to Bangkok to work but lasted only for a month. The gender division of labour changed in a way that the husband became the main breadwinner and the wives became secondary earners or not earning at all. Before the migration, though wives might have earned relatively less, their earnings played a big role in the household budget. In relation to this, all these five women had extra time. Two went to adult learning school and five participated in women's group or community activities. Meaning that they

expanded their division of resource such as information and social network, and, division of space which in two cases led to participation in village politics such as becoming the committee members of village's main development programme. For N.P., it was the time for struggle. Though she had her mother's help in looking after the children, she did any kinds of job available. For her, male overseas migration brought a life without any support from her husband.

After the husbands' return, again the gender relations changed. But this has a different meaning to those whose husbands repeated migrating and those who had migrated only once. For L.C. and K.P. whose husbands have only migrated for once, sooner or later, the wife had to go back to their roles as income earners. In cases of L.C. and K.P., positive changes in gender relations were seen. L.C. has expanded her capabilities by running a small business with the husband. Her mobility, information, and knowledge increased. Cooperating with the husband in business, the husband started to participate in taking tasks thought to be as women's domain. K.P. who actively participated in community activities was once constrained her mobility by the husband. However, she recovered it by avoiding direct confrontation but by being a good wife and a caring mother. These two cases show that though overseas migration was not the direct and only cause, husbands started to take reproductive work such as cleaning and cooking which used to be traditionally women's task. One of the reason that they could cooperate or support each other well was that these two couples were able to see what each other was doing. Meaning, that before migration, these two couples also used to work together in construction jobs. However, though they were working in the same site as construction workers, they were not engaged in same tasks and could not see each other. Now, since L.C. is with the husband doing all the same quality of jobs, and K.P. is doing work in her house, these husbands know what kind of burden they are taking very clearly. This also applies for L.C. and K.P. realising men's burden as well which led to enhance mutual support.

The husband of the remaining four repeated migrating for more than three times except that N.P.'s husband got caught in the airport on his third attempt of working overseas.

These women, except for N.P. who is now divorced and N.M. who work as a home-based contract worker sewing trousers, relied their living to the husbands' remittances. Meaning that their fall-back position is not strong compared to before. N.M. who has high human resource, mobility, and decision making power has crossed many boundaries of gender divisions. Her gender relations with her community and wider society is very positive but the relation between the husband is weakening. Chant (1992: 65) who studied about women left behind by male migrants in Costa Rica states that time and distance can put great strains on conjugal relationships. Seen from these case studies, N.M. got accustomed of the absence of husband and created her own position in wider society taking leadership roles in women's activities and community development. Now, she looks at her husband as mere means of earning income. On the other hand, C.C. and S.P.'s husbands who were away for long, strengthened their control when the wives started to violate their required role as submissive wives, crossed over the gender division of space, and started to expand their access to income using for their self-interest. Outcomes of C.C. and S.P. show that if one violates the boundaries of gender division and gender ideology, women must pay high price which can reinforce the existing unequal gender relations (cf. Kabeer, 1999a:457). The researcher stated that the longer the separation, there are more women who participate in activities outside the homestead that may be a seed for empowerment. However, seen from cases of C.C. and S.P., it was true that they once crossed the existing traditional gender boundaries but after their husbands noticed their situation, they had to return to their more stricter and smaller boundaries. Therefore, even within the same women, the empowerment degrees vary through time to time. What can be seen from cases of N.M., S.P. and C.C. is that longer the separation with their husbands, it can strengthen self-interest and lessen altruism between wives and husbands.

These life stories show that overseas migration can contribute to women's empowerment in some point but can also disempower. Some positive changes in the gender relations are temporary and some are sustainable or it can also fluctuate through time to time depending on other external factors and that is why it is difficult to understand the empowerment degree from snapshots. However, all these women experienced new

world-view and went into the process of making strategic life choices though failed or succeeded in one point or another. Therefore, empowerment must be seen as a process and not as snap shots.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Rural women in Northeast Thailand are seen as relatively autonomous compared to patrilineal societies. The matrifocal kinship system and matrilocal residence pattern that allow women to live in their natal village, somewhat, protect women. For instance, in patrilineal societies, women might have to live with the husband's in-laws, a condition that may restrict wives' autonomy and in case of divorce, women often have less support. Equal inheritance and equal property rights, and, ability to earn income supported by traditional gender division of labour also assure greater fall-back position for women compared to other cases on 'men's migration and women left behind' as some studies show. Despite of these relatively favourable situations of rural Northeast Thailand, it has been illustrated throughout this paper that gender ideology systematically restricted women into subordinated position within gender relations. However, one must note that there were several positive changes triggered by male overseas migration in gender relations and in women's inner-self.

In line with the questions raised in the beginning of this paper, the following try to give some answers based on the research findings.

Does male overseas migration bring changes in gender relations? First, one of the biggest impacts for women brought by male overseas migration were increase of income that led women to enjoy more free time. 88 per cent of the women enjoyed this and 68 per cent of the women started expanding their boundaries outside the household such as going to adult learning school, participating in income generating group activities, starting small businesses, working in a factory in Bangkok, and taking leadership roles in community activities. These activities outside the homestead contributed to expanding women's space. Though some women had gone out of the village for seasonal domestic migration before the husband's migration, the implication was different because they were not induced to go. The expansion of space again made women gain more access to resources and expanded their social network that increased their information, knowledge and skill. Three women, with increased skill and combination with husband's remittances, started a tailor business in the village. There were couples starting business

after the husband's return that expanded their capabilities to cross the boundaries of existing gender divisions. With the development of these capabilities, some even started to participate in village politics that was once men's domain. With these positive changes in crossing the existing gender divisions, there were also cases that men started taking roles that were women's domain that in the long run may bring changes in gender relations towards more equitable relations.

On the other hand, there were women who suffered from male overseas migration. Those who did not receive any remittances or could not use remittances for their well-being had to shoulder most of the men's task in addition to already assigned task as women without adequate resources. For these women, absence of husband led to insecurity, more work and stress. These women suffered from the unequal settings of gender divisions that were constructed by gender ideology. There were also cases in which women suffered from strong control of the husband, after experiencing and exercising their capabilities outside the boundaries of gender division. These cases resulted in reinforcing the existing unequal gender relations. Consequently, there were changes in gender relations but, male overseas migration did not bring positive changes in gender relations to every woman.

Then, *Under what conditions can male overseas migration contribute to women's empowerment?* As examined through the field research no one aspect of change in gender relations could be seen as directly contributing to women's empowerment in Kudjab District. This is because as seen from chapter 5, 'empowerment' is an on-going process and the degree of empowerment that could be seen now might change by passages of time or changes in role depending on women's life stages. Some empowerment dimensions can be maintained and some cannot be maintained or they might fluctuate due to unexpected factors such as accidents, disaster, or even major transformation of economic situation. At the same time, one can be disempowered in one point but can have a chance to learn from failure and become empowered.

The case of Kudjab District raises some optimism that rural women's empowerment is possible. Conditions that may contribute to women's empowerment could be explained as follows. First, this study showed that it was not only the external conditions that mattered. As seen in chapter 5, women were also acting as agencies in changing gender relations and ideology by engaging in forms of bargaining, negotiation, manipulation and subversion that can also lead to bring positive changes in gender relations that would contribute to women's empowerment. Second, starting small businesses had potential of positive gender relations seen from the cases in chapter 5. If these businesses would allow for doing the planning, buying inputs, marketing, selling, and serving jointly, both men and women may improve their capabilities and cooperation and therefore, crossing the prevailing gender divisions may be achieved. Third, increase of income and increase of free time motivated women to choose to develop and use their capabilities. Women started expanding their space and engaging in community activities and thus developed their capabilities. Fourth, women have become able to manage more income whether by receiving remittances, earning by themselves or through negotiation with the husbands. Those who succeeded to earn money by themselves or through negotiation with their husbands have delved into an important area of acquiring not only material gain but also human and social resources. Acquiring income releases women from their husbands control as the cases of C.C. and S.P. showed. However, once one relies too much on the husband's remittance, their autonomy also gets constrained when the husband restricts the finance.

At the household and local community level, changes have so far taken place no matter positively or negatively. In short, the seeds of change have been planted among women in Kudjab District. In the researcher's view, the local factors that may impede or facilitate women's empowerment are important. However, being part of national political and economic environment that is to some extent globally influenced, a genuine change toward women's empowerment can take place if actors in this environment, such as local and international NGOs as well as the national government, would positively contribute to it. In Kudjab District, actors such as local governments and NGOs have already been working there. These actors not only brought skill development but also

contributed in organising women into groups and provided space for them to exercise their potentials. Women who have taken leadership positions in the village level mostly emerged from women who actively participated in women's group funded by local governments or NGOs. In the researcher's view, as with regard to women's perception of their rights, the ground in Kudjab District is now more paved for genuine women's empowerment. Unlike twenty years back, an intervention towards positively changing gender relations might enhance women's empowerment in the future. Such intervention could be through providing facilities or creating opportunity for women to develop themselves to have a wider world-view, and cultivate broader range of social and economic links where these in turn produce the accumulative effect that would in the long-run contribute to their empowerment.

The optimism stated above should not be taken for granted. The same case of the women in Kudjab District gives rise to precautions. Unlike some previous studies that illustrates that the longer period men are away, women have more scope for managing their own affairs autonomously, the cases from Kudjab District poses a question. Though it was true that absence of the husband allowed an opportunity for positive changes in gender relations, as shown in the cases of three women (C.C., M.N. and S.P.), long separation brought stress in conjugal relationship which an existential defining factor for these women's lives.

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Annex 1

Basic Background of 50 Women Interviewees

age (years)		25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44
no. of women		12	17	7	14
education level*	average	6.3	5.9	5.7	4.6
	median	6	6	4	4
if the husband were in the village or overseas when the interview was conducted	village	7	9	2	9
	overseas	5	8	5	5
years of husband's overseas migration	average	2.9	3.4	6.6	4.1
	median	2	2	5	4
participation in community activities**, ***	average	1	0	1 and 2	1
	median	0.8	0.9	1.9	1.3

* The year of education have increased as the women's age lessens. This is because the primary education in Thailand changed from 4 years of primary education to six years in 1977 (Ministry of Education, 1998). Therefore, though generation changes, most have only primary level of education.

** The participation in activities are numbered by how many activities the woman have participated. There are total four categories of activities. Income generating groups, small business, leadership roles, and adult learning schools. If the woman participate in small business and leadership roles, she gets two points. If the woman does not participate in any of them, she gets zero points.

*** This table shows that the longer the separation with the husbands, the more women participate in community activities, however, as seen in case of C.C. and S. P. in chapter 6, the sustainability poses a question.

Annex 2

QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) Age, marital status, residence, acquired education level, number of children and their education
- 2) Destination of migration, duration, type pf work
- 3) Economic status including income. Assets, economic activities (before during, and after the husband's migration)
- 4) Changes in time spending. ie) more work, having more leisure time?
- 5) Engagement in social activities (before, during and after the husband's migration)
- 6) How the remittances are/were controlled.
- 7) What are the negative impacts during the husband's migration? ie) more work, insecurity, vulnerability? What adjustment are/were difficult.
- 8) What are/were positive impacts?
- 9) Do you think your world-view has changed? Do you have new social circles?
- 10) When do you feel happy and what are your future dreams?
- 11) What are the plans for achieving the future goals?
- 12) What would you prefer to be in your second life? Women or men? Why?
- 13) Has your relationship with your husband changed after your return?