

# **TRANSITIONS IN MIGRANT LABOR IN RURAL NORTHEAST THAILAND: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN SINCE THE 1970s**

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Since the 1960s, scholars have regarded labor migration in Thailand as a social problem, regarding people from rural villages as economically needy subjects requiring forms of development. However, in actuality, various social conditions are involved in villagers' decisions to migrate to domestic and foreign cities.

In northeastern Thailand's Tai-Lao villages, it has been customary for men to migrate, due to the system of land inheritance and matrilineal marriage. This has meant that men travel in order to establish social networks outside their villages, and to seek new land and villages to marry into. Some men also travel professionally as monks or peddlers. Conversely, women were expected to maintain their households by participating in economic activity in their home neighborhoods. Recently, however, it has become popular for Tai-Lao women to work outside their villages. This paper examines the conditions underlying the newfound mobility of these women and their access to work outside their villages, by focusing on how women began to leave their village for work, and how women's mobility has developed in one particular village.

While in the past it was married men who predominantly migrated to cities in search of work, since the beginning of the 1970s, unmarried women have begun to go to the Bangkok metropolitan area to work. This said, up until the 1980s women required the assistance of a third person to mediate their migration; during the 1990s, however, the patterns of women's movements became much more diverse.

Although Tai-Lao society has been influenced by capitalist markets as well as by urbanization, firm conditions relating to kinship and the household economy still exist, which constrain the mobility of Tai-Lao women. One such relationship is that between women and their mothers. Another is the relationship between women and their land, which they inherit from their parents upon their return to the village.

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