

The Feminization of Modernity

A Case Study of Women Migrant Workers
in a Lao Garment Factory

Latdavone Khamphouvong

Critical
Perspectives
on Regional
Integration

13

L a o s
in Transition

Contents

| | | |
|------------|---|------|
| | Series Foreword | v |
| | List of Figures and Tables | viii |
| | Abbreviations | ix |
| | Glossary of Terms | x |
| | Acknowledgements | xiii |
| Chapter 1: | Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 2: | Theoretical Debate on the Feminization of Modernity | 11 |
| Chapter 3: | Economic Transition and Ethnic Migration Patterns | 27 |
| Chapter 4: | Urban Lifestyles of Female Migrants Factory Workers | 67 |
| Chapter 5: | Factory Girls and Modern Practices | 91 |
| Chapter 6: | Conclusion and Recommendations | 119 |
| | Bibliography | 127 |
| | Index | 133 |

of whom 96% (931) are women and 4% (46) are men. Two-thirds or 69% (678) of the workers are still single, about 28% (267) are married, and 3% (32) are divorced. The main products of this factory are industrial wear such as trousers, jackets and overalls, with an annual production of around 2.1 million pieces. The garments are made from imported high quality fabrics and are mainly for export. The factory has modern sewing machines, as well as a variety of auxiliary machines. Being so large, it is actually the premier garment company in Laos.

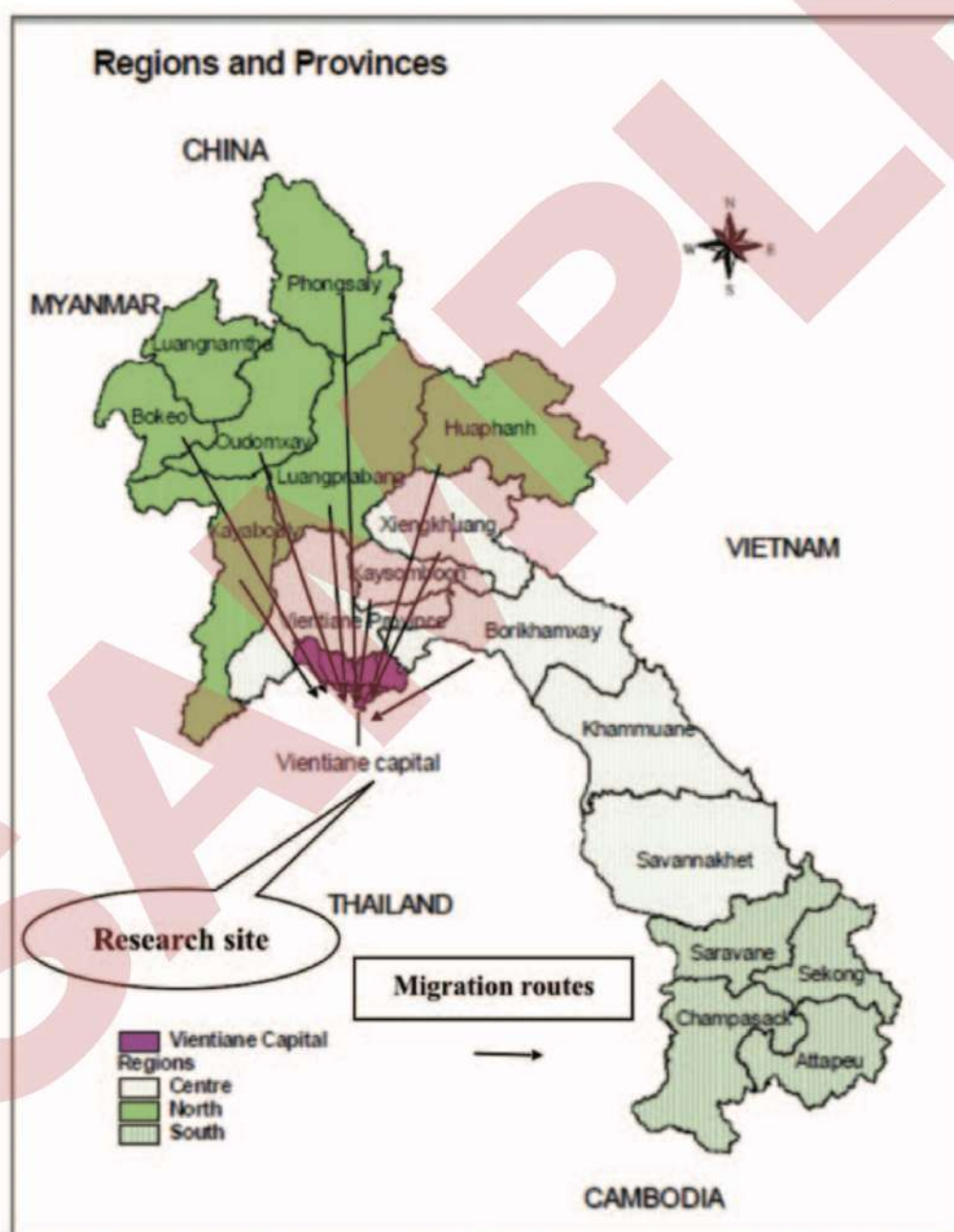


Figure 1.1: Map of Lao PDR - Regions and Provinces

Source: Kabmanivanh Phouxay 2010

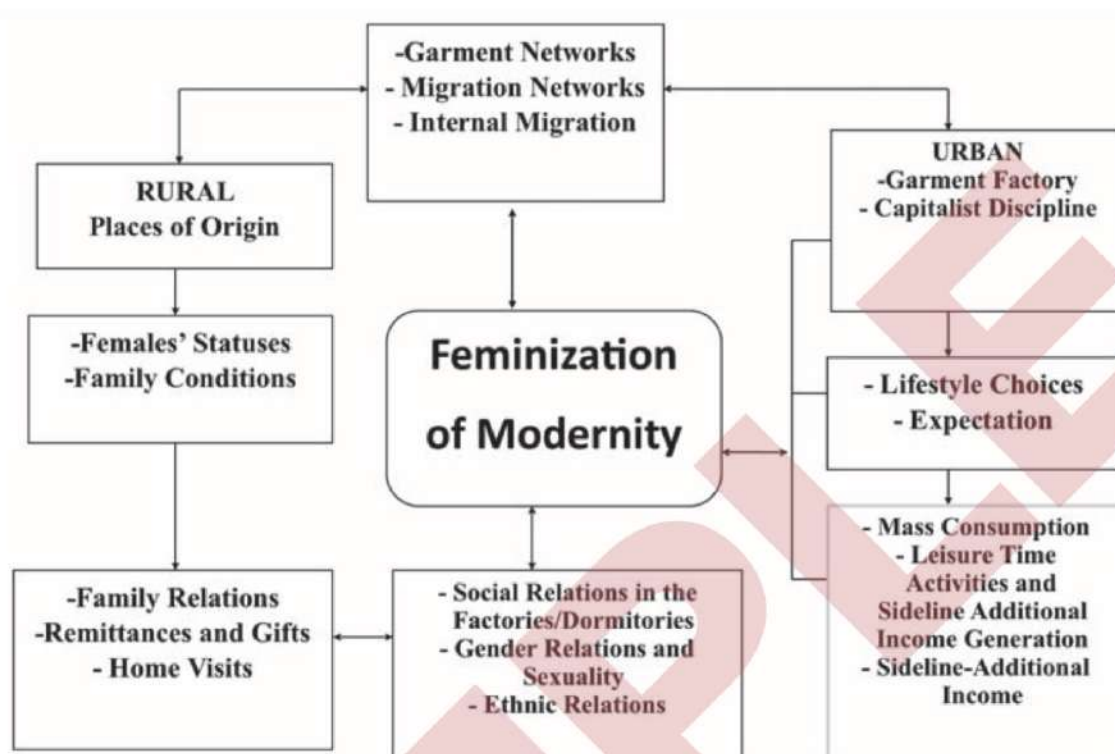


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

Overall, the conceptual framework is intended to represent the feminization of modernity of the female migrant workers, which includes the contexts of modernity and imagination. Thus Appadurai's (1996) ideas on modernity is employed by using his five 'scapes' as tools to explain the issues of globalization and modernity, these being: ethnoscap, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. Using these, he seeks to identify the things that are flowing around the globe: people, media, technology, money and ideas. He also states that globalization and modernity include significant levels of mobility, such as the mobility of labor, ideas, capital, technology and profits. These ideas are interrelated with the context of the feminization of modernity and relevant to the issue of imagination. Mediascapes, or the mass media, create communities of sentiment - groups that begin to imagine and feel things together (Appadurai, 1996: 8). Thus, to be a modern woman, the media consumer uses this tool to imagine herself, reflexively, as a female subject living in a modern society. As Giddens explains, reflexivity is the continuous monitoring of actions and their context by human beings; therefore, the modern self is a "reflexive project" consistently engaging in "self-interrogation" and "self-observation" in the light of what is happening around her, in order to

from both urban and rural areas. Women account for about 80% of total garment workers and the majority come from the Northern provinces (NSC, 2007).

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and joint ventures control much of the market. FDI companies created 13,703 jobs (63% of garment jobs) in 2007 alone, purchased 9,130 machines (59% of the total for the garment sector) and produced 28.9 million pieces (58% of the total) in the export-oriented garment sector (South East Asia Textile Business Review, 2009).

Garment exports reached a peak of US\$189 million in 2008, with the bulk going to the European Union (US\$149.7 million) and the United States (US\$27.6 million). The EU is by far the main destination of the country's clothing exports, though shipments to the US have grown in recent years, perhaps because the textile and garment industry enjoys export tax preferences from the US. In 2008, the EU accounted for 79% of total exports, the US 14%, Japan 2%, Canada 2% and other countries 3%, as shown in the table below.

| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Exports (millions of pieces) | 31.9 | 33.5 | 35.6 | 42.1 | 61.1 |
| Exports (US\$ m) | 131.7 | 144.9 | 151.2 | 152.8 | 189.7 |
| EU | 120.6 | 131.9 | 142.1 | 122.2 | 149.7 |
| US | 2 | 2 | 4 | 22.9 | 27.6 |
| Others | 9.1 | 11 | 5.1 | 7.7 | 12.4 |

Table 3.1: Lao garment exports, 2004-2008

Source: Association of the Lao Garment Industry (ALGI)

In both imports and exports, Lao garment products are also traded with ASEAN countries, with jute being the main Lao export and other textile fibers (US\$239,000 in 2008), though levels have varied significantly since 2001, indicating that the industry has not achieved sustainable growth. Export of cotton (not carded or combed) to the region has grown since 2001, but still remains relatively small at US\$182,000 in 2008 (Table 3.2). Many raw materials needed for the Lao garment industry are imported from ASEAN countries, including over 85% percent of woven cotton fabrics registering US\$19.95 million in 2008. Some 97% of these imports are from Thailand, with Vietnam supplying most of the rest. The next largest import product is woven synthetic staple fibers mixed with cotton, listed at US\$5.07 million (Table 3.3).

| Product Description | Lao Garment Exports to ASEAN | | | | | | | |
|--|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
| Jute and other textile fibers (not flax, true hemp, ramie) | 142 | 41 | 163 | 290 | 359 | 431 | 86 | 239 |
| Cotton, not carded or combed | 10 | 18 | 42 | 32 | 26 | 22 | 168 | 182 |
| Fabrics, knitted or crocheted, of a width of > 30 cm (excl. warp knit fabrics) | - | - | - | 9 | 19 | 8 | 25 | 143 |
| Woven cotton fabrics, 85% or more cotton; weight over 200 g/m2 | 92 | 181 | 6 | 16 | 26 | 7 | 15 | 94 |
| Silk yarn (other than yarn spun from silk waste) | 11 | 51 | 158 | 67 | 77 | 34 | 149 | 62 |
| Carpets and other textile floor covering | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 62 |

Table 3.2: Lao garment exports to ASEAN countries, 2001-2008 (thousands of USD)

Source: UN Comtrade statistics

| Product Description | Lao Garment Imports from ASEAN | | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
| Woven cotton fabrics, 85% or more cotton, weight less than 200 g/m2 (hd5208) | 8,169 | 9,060 | 10,300 | 11,797 | 12,567 | 13,092 | 13,796 | 19,952 |
| Woven fabrics of synthetic staple fiber (> 85% of such fiber), mixed with cotton | 879 | 461 | 159 | 358 | 1,105 | 1,763 | 6,149 | 5,074 |
| Woven fabrics of synthetic filament yarn | 3,288 | 4,551 | 6,340 | 6,503 | 4,952 | 5,525 | 4,033 | 4,480 |
| Silk yarn (other than yarn spun from silk waste) | 17,681 | 11,258 | 5,266 | 8,479 | 9,677 | 6,487 | 6,154 | 3,665 |
| Woven fabric of synthetic fiber (< 85% of such fiber), mixed with cotton | 477 | 1,026 | 1,886 | 1,204 | 1,411 | 1,557 | 1,848 | 3,028 |
| Woven cotton fabrics; 85% or more cotton, weight over 200 g/m2 (hd5209) | 6,289 | 4,654 | 6,099 | 6,455 | 5,121 | 4,940 | 4,816 | 2,962 |
| Knotted netting of twine, cordage/rope; made-up fishing nets | 220 | 187 | 199 | 497 | 1,220 | 2,184 | 2,802 | 2,276 |
| Synthetic filament yarn, not put-up | 9 | 60 | 251 | 1,048 | 935 | 1,356 | 1,563 | 1,907 |

Table 3.3: Lao Garment imports from ASEAN countries, 2001-2008 (US\$'000s)

Source: UN Comtrade statistics

The NSC Garment Factory Survey in 2006 covered 44 factories, of which 21 were FDI, 14 were Lao private investments, and nine were joint ventures between Lao and foreign companies. Factories employing more than 100 workers were classified as large, and 39 out of the 44 factories surveyed fell under this classification. The remaining five factories were classified as medium, employing between 20 and 99 workers. The survey did not cover small factories which employed less than twenty workers (NSC, 2007).

The garment factories which are mainly located in urban areas, specifically in Vientiane, provide a source of both high and low skilled labor employment for women. More noticeably, foreign investors look for low skilled workers to take advantage of cheap labor. Many migrant women enter this sector and the growth in the female work force in manufacturing has led to greater investments in the industrial sector, such as garment factories. The factory in this study requires both highly skilled and less skilled female workers, and most of the workers are young and single.

The Factory and Ethnicity

The factory opened on 6th January 1997, with its head office in Vientiane. The factory is a joint venture of Lao and Vietnamese companies, with Laos' 10% investment and Vietnam, 90%. Presently, the factory has 977 employees, where 94% are women and 4% are men (Table 3.2). Most of the staff and workers are aged between sixteen and 49 years old (Table 3.3). The factory provides jobs for both skilled and unskilled, educated and uneducated workers, as well as some foreigners. Most of the workers come from the northern parts of Laos (Table 3.4), with an ethnic diversity of workers being Lao Loum, Hmong and Khmu (Table 3.5). The workers include both single and married female migrants (Table 3.6), and the main products are industrial wear such as trousers, jackets and overalls. The factory produces around 2.1 million pieces per year and these garments are made from imported but high quality fabrics, and are mainly for the export market such as the ASEAN, EU and the US. The factory has modern sewing machines, as well as a variety of auxiliary machines.

| No. of workers | Sex | |
|----------------|------|--------|
| | Male | Female |
| 977 | 46 | 931 |
| 100% | 4% | 96% |

Table 3.4: Factory workers *Source: Factory Statistic and Data Collection, January 2012*

| Age | Number | Percentage |
|----------|--------|------------|
| Under 20 | 297 | 30% |
| 20 - 30 | 376 | 39% |
| 31 - 40 | 173 | 18% |
| Over 40 | 131 | 13% |
| Total | 977 | 100% |

Table 3.5: Age profile of workers in the factory (2011)
Source: Factory Statistic and Data Collection, January 2012

| Home Locations | | | Education | | |
|----------------|--------|------------|-------------|--------|------------|
| Province | Number | Percentage | Level | Number | Percentage |
| Phongsaly | 97 | 10% | Primary | 398 | 41% |
| Hauphanh | 159 | 16% | Secondary | 323 | 33% |
| Borkeo | 77 | 8% | High School | 175 | 18% |
| Oudomsay | 84 | 9% | College | 45 | 4% |
| Xiengkhaung | 98 | 10% | Mechanic | 15 | 2% |
| Luang Prabang | 111 | 11% | Technical | 10 | 1% |
| Sayabouly | 76 | 8% | Foreigner | 11 | 1% |
| Vientiane | 61 | 6% | | | |
| Vientiane City | 77 | 8% | | | |
| Borlikhamsay | 63 | 6% | | | |
| Champasack | 35 | 4% | | | |
| Attapeu | 28 | 3% | | | |
| Overseas | 11 | 1% | | | |
| Total | 977 | 100% | | 977 | 100% |

Table 3.6: Factory workers' education levels and places of origin

Source: Factory Statistic and Data Collection, January 2012

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage |
|--------------|--------|------------|
| Khmu | 269 | 28% |
| Hmong | 194 | 20% |
| Lao Loum | 503 | 51% |
| Foreigners | 11 | 1% |
| Total | 97 | 100% |

Table 3.7: Ethnic groups represented at the factory

Source: Factory Statistic and Data Collection, January 2012

The Feminization of Modernity

A Case Study of Women Migrant Workers in a Lao Garment Factory

Latdavone Khamphouvong

In 1986, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) put into effect its 'New Economic Mechanism' (NEM) in its bid for modernization and development. With this national policy came the conversion of a predominantly agricultural and subsistence-based economy into one focused on commodity-driven production. The country's integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its signing of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) made official its integration into the regional and international economy. The once state-planned, socialist economy was restructured into an open, liberalized one. One sector that has experienced marked growth is manufacturing, specifically the garment industry. Domestic and foreign-owned garment factories established beginning in the early 1990s now have Laos exporting 80% of its garment products to European Union (EU) nations.

Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR, has become a magnet for young rural women in search of job opportunities, a place vastly different from their impoverished rural villages. They are now part of a labor force of around 30,000 mostly unskilled and lowly paid female workers in garment factories. From rural workers to urban factory workers, the women—who are mostly ethnic minorities—face changes and challenges as they leave behind traditional roles and relationships and build their lives around perceptions of modernity, independence and consumerism. There are social and economic costs: adjustments to a new work ethic and urban lifestyle, low income and high expenditures, and obligatory remittances to families back in remote villages. Attitudes, appearances and values have been transformed to fit into the concept of modernity that urban living and working has brought to these women.

Critical
Perspectives
on Regional
Integration

13

L a o s
in Transition



CHIANG MAI
UNIVERSITY PRESS

RCSD
Chiang Mai University

ISBN 978-616-398-387-9



9 786163 983879

300 Baht