

# **Gender Remittances and Changes in Woman Status in Households — Case studies in Savannakhet, Lao PDR**

## **Abstract:**

Remittance has been widely discussed in research on migration. However, studies on remittance and gender issues as well as the related concepts remain vague. This study was conducted in Savannakhet, Lao PDR where migrations particularly female migration have been greatly increased since the completion of Second Mekong International Bridge which link Lao PDR and Thailand. It examines the benefits of remittance from labour migrants who work in Thailand and how the differences in amount of remittance from daughters and sons affect attitudes on gender difference of parents. This empirical study showed greater amount of remittance from migrate daughters are not only because of altruism, but it is one way that female migrants practice their agency and enhance their social status in households and villages.

**Keywords:** Lao PDR, remittance, migration

## **Introduction**

The debate on remittance and its impact has been going on for recent decades now. The studies on remittances by migrants in developing countries have started in 1980s (Osaki, 2003). Likewise remittance and gender perspectives, there are more studies on these issues; however the studies on how the remitting process is gendered are unclear and need more new concepts to elaborate findings.

In Southeast Asia, a number of studies show that female migrants remit more than male migrant (Osaki, 2003, Van Wey, 2004; Piper, 2005, Deelen and Vasuprasat, 2010). A recent study found that among Lao, Myanmar, and Khmer migrant workers, female migrants remit more money than men; 34,000 Baht compared with 30,000 Baht in the past 2 years (Deelen and Vasuprasat, 2010). Past studies suggest that female migrants generally retain closer

attached with kin and households of origin than male migrants (Pongpaichit, 1982; Chant and Radcliffe, 1992; Osaki, 2003). These explanations seem to suggest that women behave in more altruistic ways than men do. For instance, a study on Thai migration explained that higher amount of remittance of women than men is related with Theravada Buddhist norms indicting that women acquire religious merit for their families through material support (Vanwey, 2004). This perspective seems to be overwhelmingly powerful in regarding gender and migration including remittance as the term on dutiful daughter (eg. Keyes, 1984; Mills, 1997; Williams; 2005; Huijsmans, 2012).

However, altruistic theories of remittances cannot be always applicable and sometimes ignore self-interests and motivations of migrants. Alternatively, remittances are considered as contractual relations between household and migrant (Hoddinott, 1994; Poirine 1997). In perspectives on contractual relations, migrants are regarded as social acting and are able to practice their own strategies. In contractual relations, remittances can be repayment for family support for welfare and education of the migrant in the past or investment for future bequest of land or other inheritable assets to the migrant in the future (Vanwey, 2004). The altruism and contractual relations seem to be extremely contradiction and either altruism or contractual relations could not able to reflect the motivations behind. There is a lack of in-depth studies into the motivation of remittance (Kupiszewski et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2012) particularly in explanation the difference amount of remittance between women and men.

Agency is concept that widely applies for studies gender and migration. However, there are rare studies that apply remittance as the reflection of agency of migrant. Agency is ability of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choice (Kabeer, 1999). Agency is either visible or invisible action; motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activities and it has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power (Kabeer, 1999). Agency could fill the gap between the main two approach; altruism and contractual relations of remittance. Gendered motivation of remittance should be related to how individuals practice their agency rather than altruism or concern on contractual relations only. Thus, this study apply agency in order to examine how motivation and pattern of remittance is gendered.

Lao PDR is a land-locked country, and its transportation network within the country and across the border has until recently been quite limited. Economic activities are heavily concentrated along its border with Thailand. Being land-locked, road links with neighbouring

countries are essential for its economic growth (Rigg 2007). Hence, significant investments have been made on infrastructure development under the Greater Mekong Sub-region development. The road connection to Thailand was upgraded with the completion of a cross-border bridge across the Mekong River in 2006. Given the considerable difference in economic development across the border, the road construction and the subsequent ease in moving to neighbouring Thailand have changed the livelihoods and aspirations of women and men, young and old, of different ethnic groups in Laos, and many have migrated from Laos to Thailand (Molland 2010, 837). This study was conducted in Savannakhet, a Lao province along the border with Thailand, where the international bridge linking the two countries was completed in 2006. According to the Department of Labour and Social Affairs, many people migrated after the international bridge was completed. In 2008, 42,069 people, including 23,258 women, left to work in Thailand (Vi et al. 2009, 118); in 2000, this number was 28,561, including 13,456 women (Houghton 2006, 12). From a survey shows that the remittance increased the annual household income from 23,000 Baht to 27,600 Baht and money from remittance was very important for family particularly for daily expenses and housing improvement (Deelen and Vasuprasat, 2010).

Past studies on remittance was mainly focus on contributions of remittance to recipient, while focus on gender covers only the differences of remittance between women and men. These studies are also more likely to suggest that the differences are from burden and piety that women attached for their family more than men. This paper seeks alternative views and concept to analyses the motivations and patterns of remittance that are difference from women and men.

### **Altruism, contractual remittance and agency**

Remittance research has gained wide attention in decades, while theories have been gradually proposed by scholars. The theoretical motives for remitting are altruism, exchange, inheritance, investment and insurance (Rapoport and Docquier, 2006). However, altruism seems to be most powerful among those because it mainly focuses on motive of remitting (Meyer et al., 2012).

Altruism has been used in explanation on motivating remittances since 1970s (Agarwal and Horowitz, 2002). Mainly, altruistic theories of remittance propose that migrants act to improve the welfare of every member of their families and this does not imply that migrants are not self-interested but their act mainly responds to the needs of their family (Vanwey, 2004).

Lucas and Stark (1985) argued that remittances can be components of a self-enforcing, cooperative contract between the migrant and household. This is generally called contractual remittance (Vanwey, 2004). Hoddinott (1994) found that remittances could build the form of land bequests for migrants in future. In this view, remittance is considered as the insurance that households will pay back benefits to return migrants. For the other view of contractual remittance, remittance is also repayment for costs in migration process that household invest (Lillard and Willis, 1997).

To analyze the gender motivation in remittance, altruism and contractual remittance concept seem to be benefits in some extent. However, altruism does not pay attention with self-interest while women and men definitely have different interest due to social norm and gender constraints. In contrast to contractual remittance concept, self-interest is mainly focus but this concept concern migrant as an agent who remits by concern only tangible benefits and costs that they will gain and loose all the process of migration.

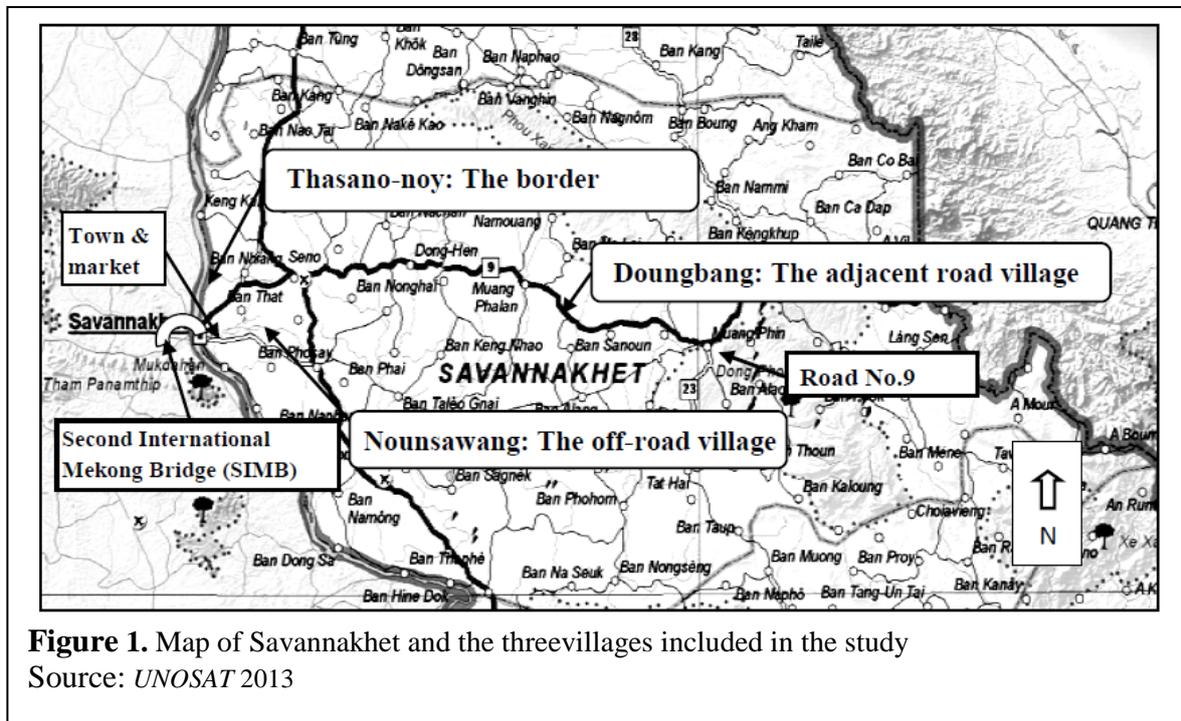
Agency could be alternatively concept that fit in the explanation of gender motive of remittance. In practicing one's agency, it includes a number of form such as bargaining, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, intangible cognitive processes of reflection and analysis (Kabeer, 199: 438). In this view, agency has the positive sense of 'power to' which refer to capacity to define their own life-choices in order to achieve their goals and negative sense of 'power over' which capacity to override the agency of others. Das (2010) suggests further that agency cannot be detected only at moments of resistance or at moment of transgression but also recognition to daily struggles, tactics and strategies in everyday life. This study, based on a three-village comparison at the border of Thailand and Laos, analyses how sense of place shapes the mobility patterns of women and men when faced with transportation and economic changes brought on by road development.

## Methodology

This analysis is based on fieldwork on the Lao side of the Thai-Lao border, in Savannakhet province, where national Road No.9 was improved and SMIB constructed. Household surveys among 102 respondents and in-depth interviews were conducted from December 2007 to May 2008 with 11 parents of migrants; 7 fathers and 4 mothers and 11 return migrants; 7 female return migrants and 7 male return migrants.

Three villages in Savannakhet were selected in various geographical settings, economic status and ethnicity. *Thasano-noy* is a **border village**, located at the border along the Mekong River opposite Thailand. It is a Lao Lum village, with 96 households. *Nounsawang* is a **off-road village**, located off-road about 14 kilometres from Road No.9 and 26 kilometres from the Thailand border; most of the village's approach road to Road No.9 is unpaved and runs through a forest. It is a Lao Lum village with 63 households. *Doungbang* is an ethnic minority village, located along Road No.9 but 90 kilometres from the border. It accommodates 77 households of ethnic minority Katangs, an Austro-Asiatic language family in the Mon-Khmer group (Freund and Gervan 2010). Household surveys<sup>1</sup> were used to investigate the livelihoods, cross-border mobility, and pattern of remittance before (year 2003 or earlier) and after (year 2008) the cross-border road development, since the SMIB was completed in 2006. Forty-one, 28, and 33 households from *Thasano-noy* (Border village), *Nounsawang* (Off-road village), and *Doungbang* (Ethnic minority village), respectively, were randomly selected for the household survey.

## Map of the three villages



## **Households, Livelihood, Mobility, and Remittance**

In the three villages chosen for this study, the main sources of livelihood before road development were agriculture and livestock rearing. Only the *Off-road village* and *Ethnic minority villages* depended on forest production. While middle income and low income villages hardly had any communication with Thailand, people in the high income village were frequently crossing the river to Thailand. For the high income village where settles on the border, many have relatives living in the Thai side and it was found that the proportion of migrants is also highest among other villages. The poverty level was the worst in *the Ethnic minority village* because their livelihood have been long depend on subsistence economic with strongly relying on their own production and low productivity than other villages due to upland rice field and tradition agriculture production. With the distance to the Savannakhet town, communication with other including sales were least in the past. In addition, their smallest house plot is limit for vegetable farm and livestock raises; average 362.4 square meters (m<sup>2</sup>) each household, while 3,828 m<sup>2</sup> in the middle income village and 1,030.2 m<sup>2</sup> in the high income village. The following section presents the livelihood changes in each village after the completion of the cross-border highway in 2006 (Table 1).

Number of migrants are various in each village. The off-road village hold the highest proportion of having migrants; 64.3 percent of sample households, follow by the border village; 61 percent. The ethnic minority village has smallest proportion of having migrants, only 4 households or 12.1 percent. Thus, remittances become one of livelihood activities in some villages; the border village and off-road village. Four households in the border village answered that remittance became their main source of income. Consistently with past studies, among the households that have migrants, amount of money from female migrants are higher than men in all villages. Particularly in the border village, households that having female migrants gain remittance higher than households having male migrants over 4 times (17,152 Baht compared to 4,279 Baht). In the off-road village, remittance from female migrants is higher than from male migrant about 2 times (8,417 Baht compared to 4,370 Baht). In the ethnic minority village, the remittance from female migrants is slightly higher than from male migrants (10,000 Baht compared to 7,167 Baht). This remittance increase average income to total sample households particularly in the border village and the off-road village (5,889 thousand Kip to 8,745 thousand Kip and 4,893 to 6,812 thousand Kip. The following section elaborates the link between agency and gender remittance.

**Table 1 Characteristics, livelihood, income, and remittance of households by village**

	Border village		Off-road village		Ethnic minority village	
	41 households		28 households		33 households	
	Unit	N	Unit	N	Unit	N
House plot land holding (m <sup>2</sup> )	1,030	41	3,828	28	362	33
Agriculture land holding (m <sup>2</sup> )	12,009	36	21,143	28	17,100	31
Total land holding (house plot and agriculture) (m <sup>2</sup> )	12,746	41	24,971	28	16,426	33
Percent of households without agriculture land	12.2	5	0	28	6.1	2
Main livelihood activities						
Rice and agriculture production/ Logging/forest collecting	24.4	10	82.2	23	78.8	26
Labour in construction, general works, and factories/ Civil servants	46.3	19	7.1	2	12.1	4
Business/ Shops/vendors	19.5	8	3.6	1	9.1	3
Remittances from Thailand	9.8	4	7.1	2	0	0
Average years in education of female household members (years)	5.0	41	3.4	28	3.4	28
Average years in education of male household members age (years)	8.7	41	5.7	28	5.7	28
% Having migrants in the past 4 years						
None	39.0	16	35.7	10	87.9	29
Only female migrant	43.9	18	28.6	8	3.0	1
Only male migrant	12.2	5	21.4	6	6.1	2
Both female and male migrant	4.9	2	14.3	4	3.0	1
Remittance from female migrant per year (Baht)	17,152	20	8,417	12	10,000	2
Remittance from male migrant per year (Baht)	4,279	7	4,370	10	7,167	3
Income without remittance (1,000 Kip)	5,889	41	4,893	28	2,407	33
Income with remittance (1,000 Kip)	8,745	41	6,812	28	2,669	33

Source: Household Survey, 2008

N = number of sample households

## **Agency and remittance**

Following the completion of Road No.9 in 2006, new livelihood activities emerged in the three villages, though in varying scales. Small shops emerged along Road No.9, and agricultural produce was sold to passing tourists. New factories were established along the road. However, lack of educational qualifications and connections meant that none of the villagers worked there. In the low income village, a new business emerged—selling forest products to tourists travelling from Thailand to Vietnam. People in the high income expanded vegetable and livestock farms with new production techniques from Thailand and took advantage of the growing demand at the border market in Savannakhet town. Migration to Thailand also increased, as did income from remittances. Not many changes were noted in the livelihood activities in the middle income village, which is far from the highway. Below, we examine the changes in each village in detail.

The second international bridge seems to attract people to be mobile more to Thailand as well as migrate to work in Thailand. Table 2 shows more detail that among gender, migrants have variety pattern in send money back home.

**Table 2**

	Remittance per year (Baht)					
	Female migrants (N=42)		Male migrants (N=27)		Total (N=69)	
	Baht	N	Baht	N	Baht	N
<b>Villages</b>						
Border village	14,914.4	23	3,327.8	9	11,655.6	32
Off-road village	6,312.5	16	3,121.4	14	4,823.3	30
Ethnic minority village	6,666.7	3	5,375.0	4	11,048.3	42
<b>Age of migrant</b>						
13-19	14,105.3	19	2,062.5	8	1,0537.0	27
20-29	9,893.3	12	2,576.9	13	6,088.8	25
30-56	7,028.2	11	7,525.0	6	7,203.5	17
<b>Marital status</b>						
Single	13,047.62	21	2,452.38	21	7,750.0	42
Married	7,060.59	17	7,275.00	6	7,116.5	23
Widow/divorce	17,500.00	4	-	-	17,500.0	4
<b>Education*</b>						
< 6 years	4,392.50	16	4,922.73	11	4,608.5	27
6-9 years	11,886.36	11	2,818.18	11	7,352.3	22
10 years and over	17,533.33	15	2,000.00	5	13,650.0	20
<b>Land of household (square metres)</b>						
<10,000	12,183.50	20	3,222.73	11	9,003.9	31
10,000-19,999	12,262.22	9	2,500.00	6	8,357.3	15
20,000 and over	8,461.54	13	4,470.00	10	6,726.1	23
<b>Main livelihood activities*</b>						
Agriculture and natural resources	6,173.3	18	2,805.9	17	4,537.7	35
Labour and business/shops	16,370.0	15	6,757.1	7	13,311.4	22
Remittance	11,928.9	9	50.0	3	8,959.2	12
<b>Household income without remittance (1,000 Kip)</b>						
<2,000	7,916.7	12	3,643.8	8	6,207.5	20
2,000-4,999	14,404.2	19	3,000	10	10,471.7	29
5,000 and over	8,668.2	11	4,000	9	6,567.5	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,048.3</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>3,524.1</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>8,104.1</b>	<b>69</b>

\* F-test Significant  $\leq 0.05$

In-depth interviews provide more explanation on various degree of remittance between female and male migrants.

### **Border village**

To Ms. Nid [Id8, a single woman, 16 years old], being single conferred her more space to be free. With the confidence from mobility to Thailand after she came back from Thailand for a few months, she tries to find other opportunity. For the second time of data collection, it was found that she was now working in Chapasask as the maid like what she did in Thailand. Mobility to other place seemed to be so simple for Lek although she was young. Thus, the marital status remains powerful in confining women space.

Parents in this village have new attitude to daughters and put the new position of their daughters similar as the son who used to use to be in higher position. The common sentences that villagers and parents of migrant workers mentioning about daughters and sons were; 'Daughters can be the guardians for the family as same as with men' and 'Daughters take care of parents rather than sons do'. Likewise Mr. See who has a daughter working in Thailand [Id13, a married man, 46 years old], he said *'To my family, our daughter is the guardian (Tee-Peung) rather than sons. She gives more money rather than the sons. In fact, I wanted to support her to study as same as her brothers, but we didn't have enough money..... When I am old, I think I can depend on the daughter. My sons wouldn't take care of me'*.

Mrs. Nun [Id6, a married woman, 25 years] a return migrant told that when she was in Thailand with her husband she did not remit to her parents due to the starting new family. She said *'When I worked there (Thailand), I earned 4,500 Baht a month... I send money back home during I work there for 5 years. It is not regularly. It is not much about a few thousand baht in 5-6 months. I have my own family so I did not have to my dad and mom. They understand. We (Mrs. Nun and husband) need to pay the rent for a room to stay'*.

Due to being a new mother of the 5 months baby, Mrs. Nun had to come back to the village and play roles of mother and depend on remittance from her husband and her parents for her and the baby's expenses. Mrs. Nun described her situation that *'....I came back for nearly a year because of the baby. I had the baby here. Now my husband sends money about 2,000*

*Baht a month. I had to come back because if I stayed there and only took care of the baby, the earnings would not be enough for us. Now, sometimes if I don't have enough money, I asked from my dad and mom. Now I feel difficult sometimes because I couldn't earn money like before'.*

### **Off-road village**

Mrs. Mee has five daughters and one son [Id16, a married women, 48 years old, Nounsawang]. The two of her daughters, 23 and 18 years old, were working in the cooked food shop in Bangkok for about 4 years. They went to Thailand and live together. Every three month, these daughters remitted her about 4,000-5,000 Baht. At present, the new house had been built and nearly finished. The new house had built with the durable materials such as woods, roof-tile, and bricks. This new outstanding house becomes the model of successful migration in this village with its size and best facility. It is one of the two houses in this village that have toilet and baht room. Mrs. Mee mentioned that she wanted her daughter to come back but the daughter insisted to work more in order to have this house and more lands.

*'I miss them. I also have talked to them to come back to work in our village, but they said they will come back since the house is completed. ...This (house) hasn't been completed. They also want to have the land and the rice fields. They earn money, keep the money, and send back to dad and mom. They are thrifty over there (Thailand). They want dad and mom to have the house. They don't travel around; they are women..... If they don't get married, they will live with us together'.*

The beautiful and huge house of Mee's family is now the symbol of success from women working in Thailand. *'Although we don't have any son, we are able to have a nice house. We glad and proud of our daughters'.* Likewise, Mr. Gan, a married man with 46 years old [Id 21, Nounsawang], represents the former generation of male migrant. He compared his difficulties and remittance from his daughter who is now working work in Thailand. *'I went to Thailand 7 years ago and worked there for about 9 months. .... I went there by a small boat with some Lao guys. There was no any card or passport at that time. I worked in the pig farm and later on in the fruit field. They said I would get 6,000 Baht, but in fact the employer*

*gave me only 1,500 Baht for the whole nine months. (He laughed.) ...At that time, there was not a phone in our village. I didn't contact my wife even once, but it was fine'.*

In five months ago, his daughter, a single woman with 17 years old, asked him to go to work Thailand and he allowed his daughter to go. Due to holding the passport that Mr.Gan paid the broker for managing the process of applying a visa which cost 3,500 Baht, Mr.Gan felt less tension for the journey of his daughter to work in Thailand as well as his daughter felt. Although the passport is for travelling not for working, they believed that it is safe from the inspection of the Thai authority. Moreover, Mr.Gan was relaxed about being away of his daughter due to frequent keeping contacts through mobile phone as well as simply visiting home of his daughter. *'She went to Thailand with the passport. If the police man asks, she has to say to come to travel. ...She phones home often through one of the house in this village; many times a month. When I hear her voice I feel less thinking of her.....'*

In comparing with his son who has been back from Thailand with little money left after work in Thailand for three months, Mr.Gan admires daughter rather than son. Mr. Gan explained that *'When my son went back, he showed me that he got 1,500 Baht. He just showed me. He did not give me (laughed). I also didn't say anything.....For this year, he doesn't go to work again. He said he's lazy (laughed). Now, he just plays around in the village and lie down in the house (laughed)...Unlike Som (his daughter), now she already sent money back home 6,000 Baht already from only 4 working months. She works in a cloth sale shop and in fact salary only 3,000 Baht a month.'*

With high amount of remittance that Ms.Gan's daughter send home, Mr.Gan become respect ability of his daughter. From Mr. Gan's interview, his daughter became more powerful in making decision in the households even if she is away from home. Mr.Gan said *"I saw that my friend had the walking tractor. I wanted to have one too. So in the year the bridge was opened [2006], I bought it by selling five buffaloes and two cows. It costs 43,000 Baht. About a year later, I bought a motorbike for my son after selling a buffalo, 7,000 Baht. Now, I also want to have one [motorbike] for myself. For this time, I think I better ask my daughter because I may spend money that she sent home."*

Mr.Gan's case shows that remittance from men and women has been compared all the time and it does has meaningful for the family. Remittance is not only the way that migrants return

benefits back to family for investment or education in the past as showing gratitude, but it is the way that women can show her ability and that lead to her power in household in future which it cannot be counted in value.

However, gender relations have developed in better way among the new family of the return migrant women. The women experienced working in Thailand accepted that they felt more confidence in her potential and she was able to exercise her power in the household. The return woman migrants were greatly careful in choosing a man for their marriage. They concerned on the characteristics of the desired husband in terms of diligence, clever, and not drinking and smoking.

The attitude that *'son is the guardian for parents rather than daughter'* remains high in this village. In addition, some villagers still agreed that women do not need to study high due to the marriage.

For instant Malee [Id15, a woman with 27 years old], after she came back from Thailand she was married with a guy from the village nearby. Now, she has a little daughter with one year old. Her husband is a working man who is one of the first leaders for charcoal production in this village. Malee's husband is also unique man that does not drink alcohol and smoke. She depicted that *'I feel more confidence after came back.....My husband is a good man. He is diligent in earning money for the family..... My husband helps me for housework when I am busy. We help each other'*.

In addition, for the single women, although the position in household has not greatly changed mainly due to the parents' mindset, it was found, like other village, that women experiencing Thailand are independent and confidence. They less concern on their age for marriage, but they more concern on the good man to marry. They care less on marriage. However, if she gets married, she should meet the guy that works hard who is able to build the strong economic status of the family.

## **Ethnic minority village**

Mobility to female migrants in this village is greater difficult than other villages including the high expenses for the broker for a job in Thailand averaged 15,000-30,000 Bath per person [Id37, a single women, 20 years old and Id 42]. Thus, there are only a few women migrating to work in Thailand. However, improvement of women status among female migrants in this village is found like the other two villages. According to the interviews and observations women experienced to Thailand are confidence either in their households or in the village. Ms. Na, a single woman [Id 40, 20 years old] told that '*...I have changed a lot. I feel more confidence. I'm brave to speak out more than before..*'. Likewise Mrs. Koon [Id42], she told that '*...I'm now confidence because I had seen over there (Thailand). I saw many things, so I feel I'm cleverer. Before this, I stayed home only. I didn't go anywhere. I didn't know how it (socio-economic condition) was like. When I was there, then I learned they do business like trading at the present. Everything is business (Too-ra-git)*'. The confidence of Mrs.Koon shifts her position in the household in comparing to her husband. Mrs.Koon just married 1 month before the interviews. She met her husband in Thailand who is older than her 10 years old. Mrs.Koon told that '*..We're equal. There is no one being a leader. If we want somethings, we help each other to earning money. It is not like you earn money, I don't anything. It is not like that*'. Regarding house work, although Mrs.Koon has not asked assists from her husband, the husband helps her sometimes when he has time such as water fetching. Cooking and cleaning tasks still belong to Mrs.Koon.

## **Conclusion**

Remittance from female labour migrants has lift up women status of daughters. Some parents consider the daughters as main earners for family. On the other hand, the findings show that female migrants do not only remit their earning to family without benefits. To female migrants, changes of parents' perception on them are important and the new assets from their remittance will belong to them. This can be considered as a way of investment. At the same time, migration and remittance has shown how female migrants are able to practice their agency. They become confidence and able to choose their own choice in their livings.

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