

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WORKING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A
CASE STUDY OF FEMALE ISAAN WORKERS IN BANGKOK

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นายแอนดริว วินเซนต์ คลิฟฟอร์ด : บทบาทของเทคโนโลยีในการส่งเสริมพลังให้กับผู้หญิงทำงาน : กรณีศึกษาแรงงานหญิงชาวอีสานที่เข้ามาทำงานในกรุงเทพมหานคร (THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WORKING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF FEMALE ISAAAN WORKERS IN BANGKOK) อ. ที่ปริกษาวิทยานิพนธ์: ดร. พิชญ์ พงษ์สวัสดิ์ , 78 หน้า

หญิงสาวจากภาคอีสานที่เดินทางเข้ามาใช้แรงงานในเมืองหลวงอย่างกรุงเทพมหานครนั้นเป็นเรื่องที่พบเห็นและรับรู้กันโดยทั่วไป หญิงสาวเหล่านี้ส่วนมากมาจากครอบครัวที่ยากจนและมีโอกาสทางการศึกษาที่จำกัดจึงจำเป็นต้องเดินทางเข้าสู่เมืองกรุงเพื่อแสวงหาคุณภาพชีวิตที่ดีกว่าทั้งทางด้านเศรษฐกิจและสังคม

แต่เทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศ (ICT) ที่มีบทบาทในการเสริมสร้างพลังและโอกาสให้ผู้หญิงกลุ่มนี้ ยังไม่เป็นที่ ู้จักมากนักเทคโนโลยีสามารถนำมาช่วยเพิ่มทักษะและเพิ่มช่องทางเพื่อเข้าถึงแหล่งความรู้ให้ผู้หญิงกลุ่มนี้ ซึ่งไม่เคยมีมาก่อน

นอกจากนี้เทคโนโลยียังช่วยให้พวกเขาสามารถสร้างเครือข่ายทางสังคม อีกทั้งช่วยรักษาความสัมพันธ์กับเครือข่ายดังกล่าวให้ต่อเนื่องได้

รวมถึงช่วยในการเสริมสร้างความมั่นใจและทำให้เกิดความคาดหวังกับอนาคตของตนเองเพิ่มขึ้น

วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ใช้กรอบทฤษฎีของเซน (Amartya Sen) ที่ว่าด้วยสมรรถภาพของมนุษย์ (Capabilities Approach) เพื่อทดสอบการขยายตัวของสมรรถภาพของมนุษย์กับการบรรลุผลสำเร็จในการปรับใช้ให้เข้ากับบริบทที่ต่างออกไปในหลากหลายรูปแบบ ดังที่ได้บรรยายไว้ในข้อมูลส่วนบุคคลของผู้หญิงกลุ่มนี้

แม้เทคโนโลยีเพื่อการพัฒนา (ICT4D) จะสร้างประโยชน์ให้มากมาย หญิงสาวจากแดนอีสานเหล่านี้ก็ยังคงพบเจอกับอุปสรรคเมื่อพยายามพัฒนาด้วยระบบเทคโนโลยีโดยเฉพาะในด้านการศึกษาในระบบครอบครัวและกฎระเบียบในสถานที่ทำงาน วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้จะทำการสำรวจจุดอ่อนดังกล่าวและแนะนำทางออก เพื่อแก้ปัญหาเหล่านั้น

ในส่วนคำแนะนำจะรวมถึงการจูงใจด้วยค่าตอบแทนเพื่อเป็นสิ่งกระตุ้นให้ผู้หญิงกลุ่มนี้มีความต้องการศึกษาต่อ (รวมถึงแรงจูงใจสำหรับนายจ้างในการอนุญาตให้พวกเขาใช้เวลาทำงานไปศึกษาหาความรู้)

เช่นเดียวกับ การจัดทำมีการมอบประกาศนียบัตร เพื่อยืนยันความสำเร็จ (ซึ่งในปัจจุบันประกาศนียบัตรส่วนใหญ่ใช้รูปแบบเทคโนโลยีสมัยใหม่เช่นเดียวกัน)

ซึ่งสามารถนำมาใช้เพื่อทดแทนประสบการณ์ที่ผู้หญิงกลุ่มนี้มีเมื่อต้องทำการสมัครงานใหม่

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KEYWORDS: EMPOWERMENT, WOMEN, ISAAN, ICT4D, CAPABILITIES, MASLOW, DEVELOPMENT, THAILAND

ANDREW VINCENT CLIFFORD: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WORKING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF FEMALE ISAAN WORKERS IN BANGKOK. ADVISOR: PITCH PONGSAWAT, Ph.D., 78 pp.

The story of female Isaan workers in Bangkok is likely well known. Many of these women come from backgrounds of poverty and limited education, and migrate to Bangkok in search of better economic and potentially better social opportunities.

The role that ICT plays in empowering these women may not be as well known. ICT has the ability to help these women acquire new skills and access knowledge previously unavailable to them. ICT further allows them to build and maintain social networks and to improve their self-confidence and outlook for the future. Using the framework of Sen's Capabilities Approach, this study examines the expansion of capabilities and the achievement of new functionings for these women in a variety of areas, as seen through the personal narratives of these women.

In spite of the many benefits of ICT4D, these women still face many obstacles in their development, particularly in the areas of formal education and with regards to family and work obligations. This paper examines these shortcomings, and provides recommendations for addressing them.

Recommendations include the creation of new financial incentives to motivate these women to continue their education (including financial incentives for the employers of these women to provide them the time needed to study) as well as recognized certifications (which are currently used in the technology field) that could be used in lieu of experience by these women when seeking new employment.

Field of Study: International Development Studies
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Student's signature
Advisor's signature

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|--|
| APCICT | Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development |
| ESCAP | Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| ICT4D | Information and Communication Technology for Development |
| NECTEC | National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (of Thailand) |
| UN | United Nations |

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Goodwill Group Foundation is a non-profit organization which offers English classes, vocational training and other services to underprivileged Thai women (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.c). A majority of these underprivileged Thai women at Goodwill Group Foundation share a common profile. Roughly 55% are from Isaan, the poor northeastern area of Thailand (Goodwill Group Foundation, Internal Survey). Most have limited formal education, having had to drop out of school in order to help support their families. According to Goodwill Group Foundation (Internal Survey), 95% of their Isaan students have not completed university, and a full 49% of those have not finished the full 6 years of Matayom. 22% have just an elementary school education (Goodwill Group Foundation, Internal Survey). Many of these women are single, separated or divorced, but yet still bear responsibility for supporting parents or children back home (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.c).

Given the limited job opportunities available for those who have little formal education, some of the students of Goodwill work in the sex industry – this number is estimated at about 20% of the student population (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.c). Those students who don't work in the sex industry face economic pressure to do so. The majority of the students, however, work outside of the sex industry - in factories, restaurants and spas, or as nannies, maids and caregivers (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.c).

Having worked in Bangkok for some time, most students would likely be considered lower middle class workers - not extremely poor but at the same time living paycheck to paycheck. Most of them work six or seven days a week. Given their limited education and financial opportunities, many consider marriage to a foreigner as their best way out of poverty over the long term (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.c). According to

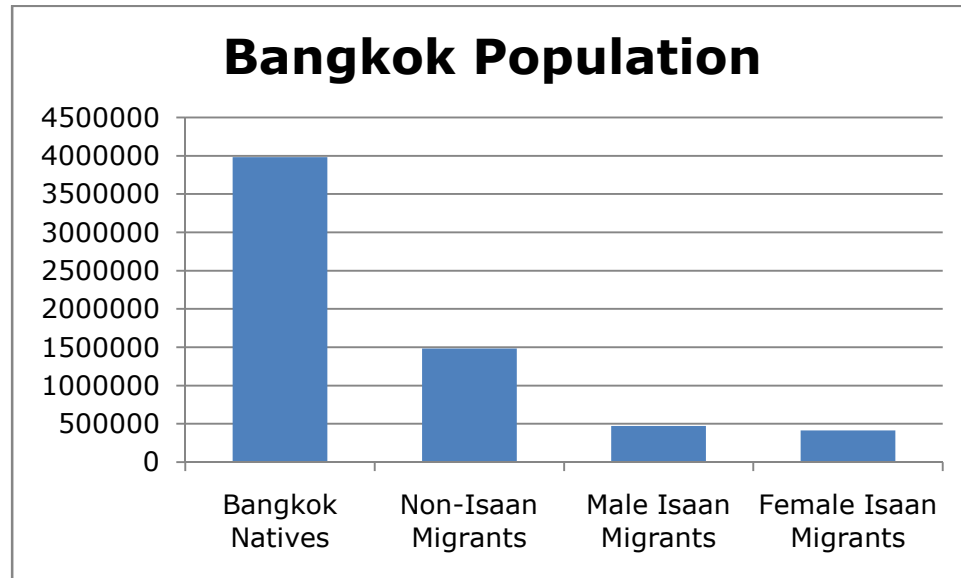
Goodwill Group Foundation (n.d.c), many of these women believe “it is not a matter of choice, but of survival for them and their families.”

These Isaan women represent a class of migrants that are trapped in a difficult state of human development. They have left the extreme poverty which defined their childhood, but are now unable to expand their “real freedoms¹” (Wallace, 2004: 7). Sen (1999: 18) called these freedoms “capabilities” - the “capabilities” of individuals “to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value.” For these Isaan women, the expansion of such capabilities is difficult because they are shackled by poor economic opportunities. They are bound by a gender role which requires them to support other family members and constrained by a low level of education. They are similarly limited by the excessive amount of time they need to spend at work, but they are fearful of switching jobs for a variety of reasons. And they are unprotected by social safety nets should they fall ill, get injured, or want to retire.

Figure 1.1 below shows the number of migrants who fall into this category. According to the 2000 Population and Housing Census for Bangkok (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2000: 2), 37.3% of the Bangkok population of 6.35 million people has migrated from other provinces, amounting to roughly 2.37 million migrants. Using the migrant data from the 2007 Migration Survey for Thailand (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2007: 85), about 37.4% of these migrants come from the Isaan region, of which about 46.7% are women. Taking the population figures from the 2000 census, that translates to almost 415,000 female Isaan migrants in Bangkok, about 6.5% of the total Bangkok population. That amounts to a very large number of women from poor backgrounds with limited education struggling to provide for their families and to get ahead.

¹ Wallace is quoting Amartya Sen from *Development as Freedom*

Figure 1.1 Bangkok Population Breakout



Note: Compiled using data from the National Statistical Office of Thailand for the years 2000 and 2007

The question arises then as to how best to help this large group of women to improve their situation and opportunities in life. One of the facilities Goodwill Group Foundation provides these women is an 8-unit PC center, complete with free internet access (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.c). Goodwill uses this facility to teach basic computers skills, the use of Microsoft Office, as well as how to use email and search the internet (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.b). It is in this same facility that one can often find students using Facebook, studying English using a variety of computer programs, or watching videos on YouTube.

Computers, the internet, and seemingly omnipresent cell phones and iPhones are part of a broad spectrum of devices known as Information and Communication Technology (ICT). ICT, when applied specifically for development as in the case of Goodwill, has become known as Information and Communication Technology for

Development (ICT4D). It is ICT4D, and its effects on these women of Isaan, which shall be the focus of this research.

Technology has led to drastic changes in the way people live and communicate. Information on virtually any subject is now available at the touch of a fingertip via the internet. People can search for recipes, learn how to sew, look up sports scores or find a doctor who specializes in allergies. Modern gadgets like the iPhone allow people to communicate with their family and friends, listen to music, or even find directions to a local restaurant, all at the touch of a button.

For the poor in developing countries who are fortunate enough to have access to technology, technology theoretically can be a powerful ally in development. Technology can provide access to information about “government financial schemes for the poor, health care, nutrition, sanitation, employment, food prices, education” (Tella and Olorunfemi, 2010: 122). In real world terms, knowledge about government financial schemes can translate to much needed resources for the poor to pay for day to day needs, or loans to start a small business. Technology can connect students in rural villages with skilled teachers in larger cities, or provide video instruction for learning a foreign language such as English (Tella and Olorunfemi, 2010: 122). Technology can even help the sick in remote areas receive better health care by allowing their doctors and hospitals to access to “other hospitals throughout the world for data collection, information exchange, and network management” (Tella and Olorunfemi, 2010: 120). The ways in which technology can improve the lives of those in the developing world is virtually endless.

This research examines how technologies such as computers, the internet, and cell phones empower female Isaan migrant workers in Bangkok in terms of personal, social, and economic benefits. This research challenges how well technology can expand the capabilities of these Isaan migrants to find better employment, to access higher education,

or even to attain higher levels of self-confidence, in the face of their history of poverty and lack of formal education. Ultimately, this research intends to identify the successes of technology in empowering this target group, ways of facilitating technology usage to further their empowerment, and the challenges that stand in the way of that empowerment.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

According to the UN APCICT (n.d.b), there is no question ICT should be used as part of the development process to help people improve their individual capacities and ultimately their own lives. Technology can help people learn new languages or do online training to acquire job and life skills they never had access to before, thereby theoretically improving economic and social prospects. But on a practical level, how is ICT really able to help overcome the challenges that these Isaan women in Bangkok face? These women have limited formal education, are often working six or seven days a week in menial jobs, and furthermore are sending some of their already meager salaries home every month to support one or more family members. While the assumed benefits of ICT4D sound great on paper, how can something like an iPhone truly improve their lives?

Sen (1999: 5) addressed the need to examine development at an individual level when he stressed that “what people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives.” We cannot simply assume ICT to be a panacea for those in development seeking to improve their lives, but rather that we must examine the possibilities of ICT to further development within the context of the lives and circumstances of a given target group. It is with this understanding that this research critically examines the impact of ICT4D on this large but sometimes overlooked group of female Isaan migrants in Bangkok.

1.2 Objectives

Main Objectives

- To provide an original case study concerning the impact of ICT on the lives and capabilities of female Isaan migrants in Bangkok
- To identify areas where ICT alone is not sufficient to further the development of these women, and to make recommendations relating to how the benefits of ICT can more effectively shared with them
- To understand the day to day experiences of these Isaan women interacting with ICT
- To understand how they acquired skills to use technologies such as computers and the internet given their lack of formal education

1.3 Research Questions

- How does ICT for Development expand the capabilities of female Isaan workers in Bangkok?

Secondary Question

- What challenges mitigate the positive developmental effects of ICT on the lives of female Isaan workers in Bangkok?

1.4 Research Methodology

This research examines the way in which Information and Communication Technology for Development impacts the lives of female Isaan workers in Bangkok, primarily as seen and experienced in the lives of these women. That being the case, this research uses the fairly open ended capability approach, which in many ways caters to examining development at a very individual level. Since a majority of the research

involved discussing the personal history, experiences and ambitions of the respondents, most of the data collected by the researcher was qualitative data. Basic quantitative data was also collected (such as age, birth province and highest level of formal education), most of which was necessary to verify a background of poverty and disempowerment.

This research used two basic methods in gathering information. First, individual and group interviews were conducted over a period of several weeks. These interviews mostly served to collect primary data concerning the experiences of these Isaan women with regards to ICT for development. Interviews were also conducted with the Program Director of the NGO Goodwill Group Foundation, as well as the former Vocational Training Manager. These interviews provided more in depth insight regarding the effects of ICT4D on the target group.

The second method used was a literature review, to examine secondary data from a variety of sources relating to the following topics:

- a. Poverty and Inequality for Isaan Women in Bangkok
- b. Women's Empowerment and the Capability Approach
- c. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
- d. ICT4D and Women's Empowerment in Thailand

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with Isaan migrant workers. The respondents represented a sampling of Goodwill students as well as non-Goodwill migrants, with a variety of different jobs, marital statuses and family configurations. The researcher interviewed Isaan migrants outside of Goodwill to determine if any differences existed regarding the impact of ICT4D on their lives. However, no noticeable differences were apparent. This may result from the fact that irrespective of *where* the respondents received the benefits of ICT4D (that is, inside or outside of Goodwill), once some level of proficiency with ICT was attained, ICT4D was able to impact the respondents in a

similar fashion. The shortcomings of ICT4D were likewise felt by the respondents regardless of whether or not they attended Goodwill. More information on the respondents can be found in Appendix C.

These interviews were generally conducted either at the workplace of the respondents or nearby eateries. One was conducted over Skype, and the lone group interview was conducted at Goodwill Group Foundation. Respondents covered a wide range of ages, from 24-40, and were members of both the formal and informal sectors. The informal sector workers included sex workers and a street vendor. The interview locations were spread over a wide area of Bangkok, including Sukhumvit, Silom, and the Khaosan area. These areas cater to westerners and thus are replete with restaurants, massage shops and bars with primarily western clientele. These shops consequently attract low skilled laborers, often from Isaan, who are looking for work and at times looking for a western husband or boyfriend. Appendix A contains sample questions from the interviews with these Isaan migrant workers.

Some respondents were known to the researcher previously through Goodwill or through personal interaction, some were recommended to the researcher, and still others were strangers chosen based on their type of work, in particular the sex workers. Drinks were purchased for the sex workers in order to access their time without disrupting their work duties. Some interviews were conducted entirely in Thai and some partially in Thai, depending on the English level of the migrant respondents.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured and open-ended, though most respondents generally discussed areas raised by the researcher. Some respondents actively mentioned that the areas brought up by the researcher covered the areas that were important to them in their lives.

An interview was conducted with the Program Director of Goodwill Group Foundation. The program director has worked at Goodwill Group Foundation for eight years, mostly with women hailing from Isaan, and consequently has significant insight into the target group. An interview was also conducted with the former Vocational Training Manager from Goodwill, who worked closely with the Isaan women during training sessions.

The list of key informants is available in Appendix E. One interview took place at the workplace of the key informant, while the other was conducted via email. Appendix D contains the list of opening questions used in these interviews.

The literature review was used to provide a theoretical foundation of the developmental process being studied, particularly the broad field of empowerment. In particular, the study of the work of Amartya Sen, with respect to the capability approach, provided significant insight into the process of development and the need to look at development at a personal and intimate level, much more so than is typical of large organizations such as the UN.

Furthermore, the literature review served to provide real world examples of ICT4D, including some examples in Thailand, which helped foster an understanding of both the power and the limitations of ICT4D in the real world.

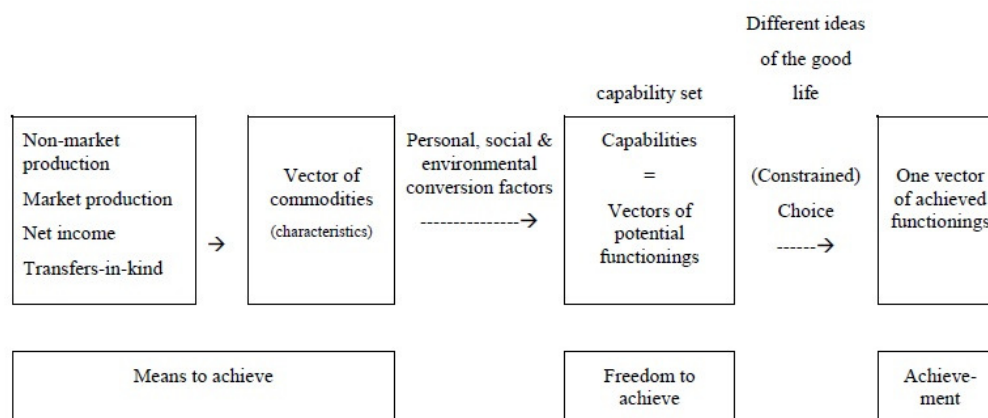
1.5 Theoretical Framework – The Capability Approach

This research involves the assimilation of qualitative data from a variety of respondents, all of whom have individualized perceptions about their current capabilities, their goals and dreams in life, about what “development” means to them within the context of their life. These characteristics fit well with what is known as the capability approach, developed initially by Amartya Sen.

Robeyns (2003: 5), a noted academic scholar who has studied and provided training on the topic of the capabilities approach, describes it as a “broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. (It) is used in a wide range of fields, most prominently in development thinking...It can be used to evaluate a wide variety of aspects of people’s well-being, such as individual well-being, inequality and poverty... The core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities”

Figure 1.2 below provides a good illustration of the workings of the capability approach. On the left side, we see what Robeyns (2003: 12) calls the “means to achieve” - resources that are at a person’s disposal such as income, goods (market produced or self- made) and services. These resources within the capability approach are known as commodities.

Figure 1.2 Capability Approach Components



Note: This diagram was taken from Robeyns (2003: 12)

On the right side, at the heart of this capability approach, are what are known as capabilities, and a second concept known as functionings. Regarding the latter, a functioning “reflects the various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen, 1999: 75). It represents what a person is actually able to do in their present state, such as “being adequately nourished (or) being free from avoidable disease” (Sen, 1999: 75). Other examples of functionings include “working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, (and) being respected” (Robeyns, 2003: 6).

A capability, on the other hand, represents “the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)” (Sen, 1999: 75). Sen illustrates the difference with the following example:

“(An) affluent person who fasts may have the same functioning achievement in terms of eating or nourishment as a destitute person who is forced to starve, but the first person does have a different ‘capability set’ than the second person (the first can choose to eat well and be well nourished in a way the second cannot).”

- Sen (1999: 75)

In the middle of the diagram we see what are called conversion factors – factors that influence how well these resources can be used to achieve a functioning. Robeyns (2003: 12) explains that personal characteristics are qualities such as “reading skills and intelligence”. For example, we can easily understand that while someone might have physical access to computers in Bangkok via the many internet shops, the inability to use a computer would hinder them from making use of this resource.

Social characteristics and environmental characteristics also shape the ability to convert a resource into a functioning. Social characteristics are things such as “public policies (and) social norms”, while environmental characteristics can take the form of

“infrastructure (and) institutions” Robeyns (2003: 12-13). In the case of Thailand, ICT4D can have a powerful influence because the Thai government made it public policy to increase internet access, affordability and computer education throughout the country (NECTEC, National Science and Technology Development Agency and Ministry of Science and Technology, 2003: 10-15). Through the execution of this public policy, the infrastructure is now available for development to take place. It is easy to see how these social and environmental characteristics are essential with a resource such as a laptop. A laptop may not be particularly useful, for instance, in expanding one’s ability to communicate if internet connectivity is not also available.

In terms of evaluation using this approach, we are able to focus either on the “*realized*² functionings (what a person is actually able to do) or on the *capability set*³ of alternatives she has (her real opportunities)... the former (tells us) about the things a person does and the latter about the things a person is substantively free to do” (Sen, 1999: 75). This approach, consequently, allows us to study the empowerment of these women at a very personal level- through their eyes as they expand their capabilities and achieve more functionings in the lives. This intimacy makes the capability approach is the ideal framework for this research.

It should be noted that while the capability approach is extremely useful in terms of evaluation, its primary usage is just that – evaluation. The capability approach does not aid in terms of explaining *why* empowerment has occurred or failed to occur. Because of this shortcoming in using the capability approach, this research will employ Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a supplementary tool to assist in understanding the reasoning behind some of the migrant responses. More will be discussed on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in the following chapter.

² Sen’s italicization

³ Sen’s italicization

1.6 Significance of Research

This research will contribute to the academic knowledge concerning the use of technology for development with respect to female Isaan workers in Bangkok, who comprise roughly 6.5% of the Bangkok population (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2000; National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2007). This is especially significant given the current prevalence of ICT4D in development discourse. For instance, the UN, via organizations such as APCICT, has made a strong push promoting the benefits of ICT4D. Similarly, public policy of the Thai government, as noted in the Thailand ICT Master Plan (2002-2006) and Information Technology Policy Framework 2001-2010, has attempted to increase the prevalence of technology in Thai society, with the goal of improving the quality of life and the economic opportunities for its citizens (NECTEC, National Science and Technology Development Agency and Ministry of Science and Technology, 2003: 10).

However, it is not a given that technology and technological capability alone will result in such outcomes. This research will outline the successes as well as the shortcomings of the use of technology in empowering these female Isaan migrants, as experienced by the migrants themselves. These findings should then be of use to organizations focused on ICT4D and potentially to the Thai government for future technology related development policies.

This research will also be useful for NGOs who work with female Isaan migrants, such as the Goodwill Group Foundation, as well as other organizations seeking to empower this large group of workers through technological training. The findings of this research should aid these organizations in developing future training programs. It should likewise assist donors in identifying programs where future development funds will make a significant impact.

1.7 Research Limitations

The term ICT4D covers a very broad area. However, the researcher primarily focused on the direct impact of basic computer skills, the ability to search/ use the internet and access to mobile phones on their daily lives. Other examples of ICT4D, such as small governmental hospitals having better access to technology and consequently improving the health care of the target group, were not directly researched.

The researcher would have liked to converse with more migrant respondents and NGO officials, however time constraints and unexpected flood conditions made this difficult. Nevertheless, the researcher feels that the information garnered from the interviews which were conducted provide a valuable insight into the effects of ICT4D on these Isaan migrant workers.

Finally, due to the limited English language ability of the migrant respondents, some of the migrant respondent interviews were conducted entirely or partially in Thai. This researcher is not a native Thai speaker. However, having lived in Thailand for several years, the researcher is conversational in Thai, and every effort was made to ensure an accurate understanding of the responses during the interviews. It is the belief of this researcher that all responses were recorded and translated in an accurate fashion.

1.8 Ethical Issues

In discussing the lives and experiences of the respondents, some of the information was of a very personal nature. All collected data was kept in the strictest of confidentiality and only numbers were used to represent the respondents.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into four sections related to the major concepts of this research. The first section is a discussion of the background of poverty and inequality faced by women in Isaan. This section is essential in the discussion of the empowerment of these women, for empowerment involves a “process, or change from a condition of disempowerment” (Maholtra, Schuler and Boender, 2002: 6). Thus, in order to understand the empowerment of these female Isaan migrant workers, we must first understand their starting point, or their state of disempowerment.

The second section continues with a brief examination of women’s empowerment within the context of the capability approach. The third section discusses Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which will be used to analyze some of the migrant responses in later chapters. The final section concludes with a discussion of ICT4D, both from the perspective of its enormous potential to empower, as well as its shortcomings in reaching intended targets of empowerment. This final section includes an examination of some prior research from Thailand related to the empowerment of women through ICT4D.

2.1 Poverty and Inequality for Isaan Women in Bangkok

The northeast region of Thailand, commonly known as Isaan, has suffered from “economic and regional disparities” for more than a half century (Fry and Kempner, 1996: 336). Indeed, the Isaan region has been the victim of “internal colonialism”, whereby Bangkok elites have exploited the area’s resources and neglected to invest in the development of Isaan itself, in order to further the modernization of Bangkok (Fry and Kempner, 1996: 336). This has left Isaan in a state of “relative backwardness” and its people a source of cheap labor for the factory owners of Bangkok (Fry and Kempner,

1996: 336). Such is the state of Isaan that in Bangkok many consider the very word a “metaphor for poverty” (Fry and Kempner, 1996: 336).

This poverty had led to disempowerment for many of the Isaan people, both male and female alike. The question arises then – how is this a gender issue and not simply a poverty issue? The most glaring answer is that in many cases, lack of family resources forces families to choose which child will receive the limited educational funding available. Typically, a son will win out over a daughter because of the expectation that the son will someday be the head of a household (De Jong, Richter and Isarabhakdi, 1996: 752), and potentially that more or better job opportunities will exist for the son in the future (De Jong, Richter and Isarabhakdi, 1996: 752; Momsen⁴, 2010: 188). The end result is that these Isaan women often lack formal education, particularly at the university and higher levels, which limits their choices relating to secure and higher paying jobs in the present⁵ (Momsen, 2010: 188).

Once out of school, these women are expected to contribute to the family finances. Poverty and the lack of development in their home provinces frequently compel them to seek work in Bangkok, Thailand’s capital city. Isaan women are often “motivated by emotional ties and a deep sense of responsibility to rural family” (Mills, 1997: 37), and thus their “migration is motivated by the desire to repay their parents for raising them” (De Jong, Richter and Isarabhakdi, 1996: 752). However, it should be noted that they also come to Bangkok seeking to find a new sense of self – to become a woman who is confident, who is knowledgeable in the ways of urban life and who has the material goods and fashion that go along with it (Mills, 1997: 37).

Upon their arrival in Bangkok, though, these women may find the road to economic prosperity and a higher quality of life is difficult. These women end up

⁴ Momsen is talking about women in the South in general

⁵ Momsen is talking about women in the South in general

becoming part of a large pool of expendable labor for Bangkok employers. They are hindered by their lack of formal education, particularly when it comes to entering the formal labor market (Momsen, 2010: 182). They are considered to have a “limited commitment to wage employment” because of the expectation that they will get married and leave their jobs (Mills, 1997: 38). They often are prevented from entering certain professions due to alleged “physical weakness” or based on some “moral dangers” (Momsen, 2010: 178). In the end, they typically find themselves “concentrated on the periphery of the labour market” (Momsen, 2010: 178) – that is, largely employed in the informal sector, working insecure, low-paid jobs⁶ with difficult working conditions and few fringe benefits (Momsen, 2010: 178-182; Mills, 1997: 38). Once again, we see their choices for work are limited.

And no matter if they work in the formal or informal sector, they may be subject to sexual harassment, both from peers who are not used to working with females and from male superiors, who may demand sexual favors in return for their job security. Unfortunately, women who are in dire need of money may not be able to resign from such positions⁷ (Momsen, 2010: 186). This may be the ultimate form of lack of choice.

Finally, for whatever job they do find, they are still shackled by having parents and siblings or children at home with little financial resources that need to be taken care of and supported. Thus, some of their earnings must be allocated to supporting parents and possibly these other dependents. This has the potential to further limit choices for them in matters of finances, work and perhaps even in the area of marriage (Mills, 1997: 37-50; De Jong, Richter and Isarabhakdi, 1996: 752), as they put familial financial obligations ahead of personal goals and dreams.

⁶ Including being self-employed

⁷ Momsen is discussing women in the South in general

2.2 Women's Empowerment and the Capability Approach

The term “women’s empowerment” is a broad and somewhat ambiguous term, and indeed it can take on different forms depending on the group being empowered. Consequently, it behooves us to conceptualize specifically what this empowerment should look like in the case of these Isaan women using the capability approach. Kabeer (1999: 437) succinctly defines the general term women’s empowerment⁸ as “(The) expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.”

Maholtra, Schuler and Boender (2002: 6) expand upon this definition by highlighting two factors which differentiate it from a variety of other similar terms and concepts such as women’s “autonomy” or “gender equality”. This definition emphasizes “1) the idea of process, or change from a condition of disempowerment, and 2) that of human agency and choice” (Maholtra, Schuler and Boender, 2002: 6). Kabeer (1999: 437) further clarifies the notion of change in the first part of the definition, noting that some people may be powerful because they have many choices in their lives, but are not *empowered*⁹ because they have never experienced a lack of choices.

Sen echoes the sentiment of Kabeer’s definition under the capability approach. Sen’s concept of development considers “the freedom of individuals as the basic building blocks. Attention is thus paid particularly to the expansion of the ‘capabilities’ of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value” (Sen, 1999: 18). With respect to women’s empowerment in particular, this empowerment involves women acting as an agent of change in their own lives, and “rectifying (the) many inequalities that blight the well-being of women and subject them to unequal treatment” (Sen, 1999:

⁸ Kabeer’s paper is focused specifically on women’s empowerment even though this definition does not include the word “women’s”

⁹ Kabeer’s italicization

190). Thus, women's empowerment under the capability approach speaks to expanding the freedom of women to choose to do what is important to them, without being held back by the constraints imposed on them by poverty or by the cultural or societal chains which bind them.

In the case of these Isaan women, then, their empowerment involves addressing freedom-restricting limitations that stem from their background of poverty and gender related burdens imposed by society. Such limitations include their lack of formal education, their difficulties finding work in the formal sector and stable work in general, and their struggles in building their own future because of familial financial obligations, to name but a handful of the obstacles they face. These are significant obstacles to overcome, and with regards to obligations imposed by society and tradition, overcoming said obstacles could potentially involve rejecting societal traditions. These issues will be discussed further in the following chapters.

2.3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a topic often used in the business world by management and human resources in discussing employee motivation. The goal in the business world is to help motivate employees to perform at their highest level. Maslow's theory of motivation argues that "human needs are hierarchical—that unfulfilled lower needs dominate one's thinking, actions, and being until they are satisfied. Once a lower need is fulfilled, a next level surfaces to be addressed or expressed in everyday life. Once all of the basic or deficiency needs—so called because their absence is highly motivating—are satisfied, then human beings tend to pursue the higher needs of self-actualization" (Zalenski and Raspa, 2006: 1121). Maslow's hierarchy is shown below.

Figure 2.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Note: Diagram from Zalenski and Raspa (2006: 1121)

Maslow's hierarchy is not often discussed in development discourse, though logically it would seem like the hierarchy is even more relevant for development than it is for business. That is, employees in the corporate world are at minimum meeting their physiological and usually their safety needs. Those in development, on the other hand, may not be meeting *any* level of the hierarchy on a regular basis. Consequently, it is reasonable to think that those in development are likely to take advantage of development activities which address these needs, particularly on a long term basis. Conversely, development activities which threaten these needs, albeit unintentionally, are likely to be met with little enthusiasm. We shall see how these needs affect the decisions of these Isaan women in the following chapters.

2.4 ICT4D and Women's Empowerment In Thailand

As mentioned earlier, current development discourse lauds the great potential of ICT4D. For the sake of clarity, ICT can be defined as a “diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information” which includes such technologies as “*computers, the Internet, broadcasting technologies (radio and television), and telephony*¹⁰” (Tinio, n.d.:4). Telephony includes both fixed line and mobile technology.

Indeed, ICT4D can be a powerful force which empowers those in a state of development to overcome the obstacles in their lives, to “unleash (their) potential and enhance (their) capacities to improve their lives” (APCICT, n.d.b). Tella and Olorunfemi (2010: 115-116) summarize the benefits of ICT within current development discourse as follows: “All over the developing world, ICT is no longer just an option...It is a necessary component of education in development... ICT can enable people to make a better living for themselves, but it is also opens domain for political participation ...Information and communication technologies (ICT) have the potential to offer vast advantages to users. ICT could bring broad and in-depth information to those who have been hitherto denied such knowledge and thus opportunities for social and economic mobility.”

The Thailand Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Master Plan (2002-2006), further mentions a variety of specific applications of technology use for development. Examples include using ICT to learn languages, to search the internet to access information, to enhance classroom learning, to increase job skills and even to allow for distance learning (NECTEC, National Science and Technology Development Agency and Ministry of Science and Technology, 2003: 10-15). Distance learning in

¹⁰ Tinio's italicization

particular can be beneficial to women in developing countries because it “enables them to learn at their own pace” thus providing them “a second chance to step into the main systems of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfilling family responsibilities” (Evans¹¹, 1995: 1).

Menguita-Feranil (2009: 21-22) validated many of these assertions in a study she conducted on female migrant Burmese workers along the Thai-Burmese border. She found that many of these women had access to and used mobile phones to keep in touch with family members back home in Burma. She likewise found that many of these marginalized women had access to computers and the internet, and used technology for such purposes as sending email, keeping in touch with friends abroad (Burmese and non-Burmese alike), and educational endeavors.

Certainly, the potential benefits of ICT4D are hard to deny. However, it is important to consider Sen’s earlier warning that “what people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives” (Sen, 1999: 5). That is to say, the context of the lives of those in development still must be taken into account even as ICT4D attempts to improve their lives.

One such item to consider is that such things as regular internet access and even basic computer skills are not a given in a developing country, in the same way that not everyone in a developed country can use a computer or access the internet. Furthermore, even if one has basic computer skills and some means of accessing to the internet, it does not mean that one sees or understands the value in these tools. A recent study which took place in several developing countries including Thailand found that “traditional communication tools such as radio, popular theatre, and film were evidently the most effective tools in interacting with grassroots women” (Ofreneo, Portus, Serrano and

¹¹ Evans is citing Trivedi’s 1989 work *Women's development through Distance Education*

Stiftung, 2009: 46). Similarly, in the previously mentioned study concerning the effects of ICT4D on the marginalized women along the Thai-Burmese border, Menguita-Feranil (2009: 22) found that some women were in fact excluded from the benefits of ICT, often due to illiteracy or the inability to afford mobile phones.

Thus, while ICT certainly has the *potential* to provide the Isaan women in this research with the skills and tools they need to access the jobs, knowledge and resources previously denied to them, we cannot simply assume that ICT4D successfully bestows these benefits upon them. The next two sections examine how that potential plays out in the real world, when faced with the day to day realities in which these female Isaan migrants live.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS: What challenges mitigate the positive developmental effects of ICT on the lives of female Isaan workers in Bangkok?

Computer and internet access is readily available to most people in Bangkok, on the surface at least. Internet shops can be found scattered throughout the city. And the cost of usage, while varying from shop to shop, can sometimes be as little as 10 Baht per hour. Empirical evidence from the respondents supports the fact that ready access to computers and the internet exist in Bangkok, as no respondent mentioned physical accessibility to such technology as an issue. Goodwill students in particular are able to visit the 8-unit PC center at the Goodwill office, complete with free internet access (Goodwill Group Foundation, n.d.a).

Cell phones are also prevalent throughout all of Thailand. Empirical examination of the respondents confirmed this as well, as every person interviewed owned at least one cell phone, sometimes multiple. This fact is also confirmed by recent statistics – according to Sullivan (2010), Thailand has reached more than 66 million phone numbers, compared to a population of some 64 million people (UN Thailand, 2008), giving roughly a 103% cell phone penetration rate.

These factors were important while considering the research topic for this thesis. Given the high degree of cell phone penetration in Thailand (and consequently Bangkok) and the large number of internet shops located throughout the city, it seemed reasonable that if ICT would have a positive developmental impact anywhere, it would certainly be obvious here in Bangkok. What was more difficult to anticipate was the extent to which ICT4D could help these Isaan migrants achieve personal, social and economic benefits, given their challenges in life.

“You can find many things on the internet, but you can’t easily change your level of education- that’s the biggest barrier.”

(Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“I don’t have enough money and I don’t have enough time to study. I finished 3 credits at Ramkamhaeng but I felt like I didn’t understand enough when I studied at home by myself. I am from upcountry and I don’t always understand the vocabulary in the books. I need to have a teacher. I still want to study at university, but not now. I also studied at Sukhothai (Thammathirat) but I had the same problem.”

(Respondent 1b¹², Interview, 5 October 2011)

The issues discussed in the previous two responses were echoed by several of the interview respondents. The common obstacles these Isaan migrants face are clearly apparent to them as a result of shared experience, and these obstacles have been holding them back since the very first days they came to Bangkok seeking work. And in spite of the many benefits of ICT4D, some of these obstacles continue to haunt them.

The most common issues mentioned by the respondents will be discussed first, namely: formal education; family obligations, money and time; real-world experience, lack of computer skills and a tendency to use traditional methods over modern ICT. One issue brought up by a single respondent will also be discussed – a language barrier on the internet. Other themes brought up by the NGO official will be discussed afterwards, including age, the lack of feedback from computers and the *Mai Bpen Rai* attitude. Finally, we shall conclude with an examination of the migrant responses as they relate to the Maslow hierarchy of needs and Sen’s concept of women’s empowerment.

3.1 Formal Education

Lack of formal education is a typical problem facing impoverished women in developing countries, so it was not at all surprising that the respondents acknowledged

¹² This respondent is talking about continuing her education online

that their low levels of formal education presented a major obstacle to them. Respondent 1a (Interview, 30 September 2011) shared that one of her dreams is to work in a government office in her home province, close to her family. Yet, as of now, she believes that attaining that dream is impossible, saying that her *Matayom 6* education – a high school diploma – is insufficient to work in the government office, at least in a position suitable for her overall skills and knowledge.

However, this research asks the question of what such obstacles mitigate the effects of ICT4D, which is particularly relevant here given that one of the major professed benefits of ICT4D is that it increases access to education, both on a formal and an informal level. Specifically, as mentioned earlier, distance learning is thought to address the issues of working women with difficult schedules and family obligations because it “enables them to learn at their own pace, ... including higher education ... (while) at the same time (enabling them) to earn ... (and) to (fulfill) family responsibilities” (Evans¹³, 1995: 1).

That being the case, after the first interview it seemed necessary to add a follow-up question about hindrances in using ICT to improve one’s life. For, if not having a bachelor’s degree was a major obstacle, but the migrants knew they could simply study online to get their bachelor’s degree, what exactly was stopping them from overcoming this major obstacle? This research even went so far in some interviews as to raise the existence of two major open universities in Bangkok, Ramkhamhaeng and Sukhothai Thammathirat, the former of which specifically advertises that it is “(based) on the principle of equality of opportunity to all regarding higher education, (and that it) provides teaching and learning systems both on-campus and via distance learning” (Ramkhamhaeng University n.d.).

¹³ Evans is citing Trivedi’s 1989 work *Women's development through Distance Education*

Furthermore, looking back on the migrant responses after the fact, several of the respondents had made the effort to go to *Kor Sor Nor* (Respondent 1a, Interview, 30 September 2011; Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011; Respondent 11, Interview, 7 October 2011), which was described during the research as adult education which gave the respondent the equivalent of a *Matayom* 6 degree, a high school diploma. Once again, one must wonder why if they made the effort to get their high school equivalency diploma, why did they stop there instead of continuing at the university level, if distance learning was accessible for them?

The answers to this question varied widely, and actually touched on several of the other factors that these women felt constrained them in achieving the benefits of ICT4D in their lives. Looking at the response from Respondent 1b quoted previously, she initially mentioned time and money as key factors, which are of course legitimate reasons in and of themselves. But then she proceeded to expand upon her response with yet another issue that is noteworthy, saying that “I felt like I didn’t understand enough when I studied at home by myself. I am from upcountry and I don’t always understand the vocabulary in the books. I need to have a teacher” (Respondent 1b, Interview, 5 October 2011).

This latter part of her statement draws attention to perhaps several areas where ICT4D falls short. The first is that ICT4D cannot replace years of formal education in terms of language experience and usage. Formal education allows one to build an increasingly advanced vocabulary in one’s native language, something which those of us who have taken college entrance exams are made keenly aware of. While Respondent 1b is a native Thai speaker, her limited formal education did not equip her to handle the language requirements needed to study university-level distance learning.

Secondly, we may see an element of the need for face-to-face interaction in her statement. Ofreneo, Portus, Serrano and Stiftung (2009: 57) found that “Oral communication or direct, two-way, face-to-face interaction is the most empowering way

of sharing information between intermediary groups and grassroots women.” While the authors were talking specifically about empowerment agencies sharing information with grassroots women, I would argue that this specific form of educational empowerment is not all that different. A key informant of that same research, speaking on the topic of empowering women, further explains, “...the best way we can empower them...(is) to go and sit down with them, explain to them, and of course, allow for that dialogue and exchange of opinions or views and opportunities for clarification” (Ofreneo, Portus, Serrano and Stiftung, 2009: 58).

In short, the statement about needing to have a teacher may imply more than just a student needing someone to explain difficult vocabulary. Grassroots women appreciate the social aspects of information sharing – being able to discuss their views and share their opinions about a given subject (Ofreneo, Portus, Serrano and Stiftung, 2009: 57). Evans (1995: 11), stresses that the manner in which the curriculum is presented is one of the factors determining success for distance education for women, and that developing “‘Woman-friendly’ materials (with) social interaction and peer support” is one important way of overcoming this issue. Because the curricula at these open universities are likely not developed in this fashion, they might not be suitable for Isaan migrant women such as Respondent 1b.

“It’s about money. I don’t think I can afford it. I don’t have enough time to go back either. [I then asked simply if she knew about the open universities at Ramkhamhaeng University /Sukhothai Thammathirat]. You’re right maybe not too expensive, but you have to read a lot – you don’t have to go to school but you have to read a lot. I work a lot which is stressful and I don’t want to also be stressed about school and exams.”

(Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“Before when I worked in the factory I finished Kor Sor Nor. I knew about Ramkhamhaeng and Sukhothai (Thammathirat) because the teachers at Kor Sor Nor told us to continue studying there. But at the time I had to work long shifts, sometimes even 24 or 26 hours straight, so I couldn’t study.”

(Respondent 15¹⁴, Interview, 13 October 2011)

“Well, I’m a little lazy to study and I feel like I’m too old. I thought about it before but I didn’t have time back then. Now I have more time because I have a day off but I’m too lazy.”

(Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011)

Like Respondent 1b, Respondents 5, 15 and 2 also make references, albeit in their own way, to what I would call work related constraints on their time. Respondent 5 works 6 days a week and faces natural stress from her busy schedule (Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011). Respondent 15 stated that after finishing *Kor Sor Nor* she was thinking about continuing with her university education online, but her work schedule sometimes required her to work literally 24 hours straight, leaving little room for anything other than her work (Respondent 15¹⁵, Interview, 13 October 2011). And Respondent 2, while calling herself lazy and old, in fact works two different jobs, 6 or 7 days a week and is several years younger than this researcher, and therefore I feel neither the word lazy nor the word old are applicable to her.

“I have children to take care of. I don’t have time to study.”

(Respondent 7, Interview, 7 October 2011)

¹⁴ This respondent is now married and living in a foreign country

¹⁵ This respondent is now married and living in a foreign country

Respondent 7's statement identifies a familial constraint on her time. Her obligation to look after the well-being of her children and the time-requirements thereof make it difficult for her to allocate the time and energy necessary to continue her studies.

In all of these previous four situations, as well as with other respondents who spoke similarly, the point being made is that while distance learning at the university level via ICT is available to them in the theoretical sense, physical time and energy demands from their busy schedules still make it impossible for some of these Isaan migrants to access it. In fact, in spite of the possibility of studying online, *not a single one* of the respondents has thus far completed her bachelor's degree or made any substantial progress in doing so.

3.2 Family Obligations, Money and Time

“I have 4 siblings. My youngest brother graduated from university, but the other 3 siblings went to work before they could go to university. Only the youngest one sends a little money home now, but he has his own family so he can't help out too much...I don't ask for money from anyone. I support myself, my parents, my child and 2 cousins, all by myself.”

(Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011)

“I bought a computer for the first time about two years ago. However it broke. I haven't bought a new one because I still need to take care of 5 people at home and I think the money could be better spent somewhere else.”

(Respondent 8, Interview, 7 October 2011)

In analyzing the data provided by the respondents, one thing that stood out right away was the number of respondents who had to support individuals outside of their immediate household. 13 of 15 the migrant respondents stated that they presently bear

such obligations to their family upcountry. Surprisingly, though, family financial obligations were specifically mentioned as a hindrance by only two respondents (Respondent 7, Interview, 7 October 2011; Respondent 10, Interview, 7 October 2011).

Earlier, it was noted that Isaan women are often “motivated by emotional ties and a deep sense of responsibility to rural family” (Mills, 1997: 37), and that they are, at least in part, “motivated by the desire to repay their parents for raising them” (De Jong, Richter and Isarabhakdi, 1996: 752). Because of this, the responsibility of taking care of their parents and other family members may be so ingrained in them as a cultural norm that they do not consider it a burden, merely a normal part of their life. While *they* may not see it as a burden, as an outside observer it is hard to objectively say that it is not.

Both of the respondents quoted are responsible for taking care of 5 dependents. The former is actually a bar girl, who said she “only thinks about saving money for the future, to take care of (her) family” (Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011). Her persistence to succeed at her job and make money by any means necessary even manifested itself in her ICT interactions. In discussing what important things she has learned using ICT, she stated that, “I have found websites to help make myself look better for work. I am very good at doing makeup now and usually help some of the other girls get ready for work as well” (Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011). In spite of all her sacrifices, she did *not* call her family obligations a burden.

Similarly, the latter quotation reflects a migrant woman selflessly refraining from purchasing a replacement laptop because of her family obligations – the very first laptop of her life no less. This respondent uses a computer at her work and so her computer skills are directly relevant to her livelihood. She also mentioned that when she had her laptop, she actively used it to stay in touch with friends via Skype and email, especially her friends overseas (Respondent 8, Interview, 7 October 2011) – thus it was important in her social life as well. Nevertheless, her desire to take care of her family outweighed her own personal and professional needs, and she has yet to purchase a new computer.

While the other respondents with dependents had fewer dependents than the two migrants quoted above, all of them had to devote some of their financial resources to dependents- financial resources that could have gone to things like opening a business or buying a new computer. And even though they may not have considered it, it is likely they also had to spend more time at work to earn more the extra money to support these others – time that could have gone to studying online for a bachelor’s degree, or developing skills in English online.

Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) notes another aspect of this obligation, stating that, “There is a family concern for many of these women that prevents them from taking risks that would put their family contribution in jeopardy.” Thus, not only does this obligation impact these women directly in terms of money and time, it may prevent them from finding new and better employment because of the fear that things will go awry at the new job and that their ability to send money back home would be impacted.

These Isaan migrants don’t think of their families as burdens. They love their families and *want* to take care of them. They are willing to sacrifice their time, money, and in some cases their physical well-being in order to provide for them. Indeed, meeting family obligations as women in and of itself is the achievement of a functioning. However, as an impartial observer, this researcher must conclude that these obligations do in fact create barriers for these women in terms of saving money for the future, having free time to learn new skills or socialize, and in some cases finding better or safer work. Indeed, in the achievement of this one functioning, these women may sacrifice several other functionings. And yet, these Isaan women are willing to bear these burdens day in and day out as an expression of their love for their families upcountry. This topic will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

3.3 Real-World Experience

“Experience is also a big barrier for work. Some companies want several years of experience, and no matter how smart you are, and how many skills you’ve gained from the internet, it still doesn’t help.”

(Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“Using a computer only, without real-world experience, limits their range of knowledge – they can answer questions they found on the computer or internet, however should they get a different type of question when they are interviewing, they still may not be able to answer. Computers don’t provide real world experience, which is often what employers are looking for.”

(Unyawachsomrith, Interview, 2 October 2011)

Respondent 5’s statement provides a good summary of another major obstacle for these women face in achieving the benefits of ICT4D. As we shall see later on, ICT4D does provide many of these women with new skills – skills using MS Office (Respondent 1a, Interview, 30 September 2011) or skills using English (Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011; Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011; Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011; Respondent 8, Interview, 7 October 2011; Respondent 10, Interview, 7 October 2011) to name a couple. But are new skills, even skills using a powerful language such as English, really enough to help these migrant women?

Unfortunately, the answer in many cases is still no. Many companies have rigid experience requirements. Even should these women acquire their bachelor’s degree, their lack of real world experience would still prevent them from acquiring these jobs. As Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) stated earlier, “Computers don’t provide real world experience, which is often what employers are looking for.” While it’s easy to understand the need for companies to screen potential applicants, rigid education or experience requirements prevent those who have acquired skills and knowledge through

other means from having the opportunities they deserve. That being said, while many doors are still shut to these migrants because of their lack of experience, *some* doors do get opened via knowledge acquired through ICT4D. We will discuss these in the next chapter.

3.4 Lack of Computer skills/ Age

“I just started studying computers a few weeks ago. I just learned here at Goodwill. Before last year, I didn’t have time to study computers and I didn’t own a computer”

(Respondent 7, Interview, 7 October 2011)

Several respondents noted that their computer skills were a problem in accessing ICT4D (Respondent 7, Interview, 7 October 2011; Respondent 9, Interview, 7 October 2011; Respondent 11, Interview, 7 October 2011; Respondent 12, Interview, 7 October 2011; Respondent 14, Interview, 8 October 2011). These respondents all had something in common - all of them were over the age of 30, and with only one exception all were over 35.

The Program Manager of Goodwill noted during her interview that age might be an issue with regards to computer use and knowledge. She stated, “The younger generation may have more exposure to computers than the previous generation. Therefore, younger students may be more inclined to use and understand computers than those migrants who came to BKK many years ago” (Unyawachsomrith, Interview, 2 October 2011).

Unyawachsomrith also brought up another very interesting point about computer skills for beginners. She said, “Those with very basic computer experience often require guidance for tasks that others with more experience might consider easy. For instance, one company provided access to a website for our students to train in the various Office

tools. However, some students still required help from the staff in order to access and effectively use the site. Their basic computer skills weren't enough to allow them to access the training tools on their own, even though we had explained the methods in Thai and the site is in Thai as well. What an expert (such as a person who creates training programs) considers to be 'simple' is not the same as what a beginner considers to be 'simple'" (Unyawachsomrith, Interview, 2 October 2011).

Thus, when we talk about the benefits of ICT4D, we cannot assume that all of these Isaan migrants have equal access. Age seems to be a mitigating factor, considering that those who grew up prior to when Thailand was developing their computer and internet infrastructure may not possess the skills and comfort levels to use computers effectively. Still other migrants, while possessing very basic computer skills learned in school or from friends, can do the simple tasks they were shown to do, but are not skilled enough to explore technology by themselves and to unleash the full benefits of computers and the internet on their own. They may still require some handholding until their skills reach a certain level, and without someone to guide them, some of the benefits of ICT4D may still be out of reach.

3.5 Tendency to use Traditional Methods over modern ICT

All of the migrant respondents acknowledged the potential of the internet to help them look for new jobs and financial opportunities. However, many of the respondents said something to the effect of "...I think in the future I might look for regular work (online) in an office. However, I have never looked for a job on the internet" (Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011).

In the context of the capability approach, we might say that this is OK – the migrants now have an expanded capability to find better jobs. And indeed, as we will discuss in the next chapter, their expanded potential to find new work and better benefits and opportunities is a great thing.

But one concern that should be noted is the way many of them spoke of using the internet with regards to work and financial opportunities as some sort of distant dream that they hoped to accomplish at an unspecified time in the future. Unyawachsomrith summarized the problem very well when she gave a real world example of this problem in action. She said, "...many of these women aren't using the internet to look for a job online. For instance, we have a job posting advertising (in Thai) a job specifically for those who don't have a bachelor's degree. However all of our applicants so far have had bachelor degrees. That is, those searching the internet for jobs may mostly be the fairly well educated crowd. Most of our students prefer to look for jobs on (physical) bulletin boards" (Unyawachsomrith, Interview, 2 October 2011).

She continued on the topic of the preference for traditional media by saying, "TV is probably a more effective way of reaching these women- they may see a news story on TV about a women who started a small business and got rich, and then get interested – they need an inspiration, people don't just get computer skills and all of a sudden start thinking about the future. However if they see something on TV they may then use the internet to find out more, for instance (about) ... starting a business" (Unyawachsomrith, Interview, 2 October 2011).

These statements and the empirical evidence seems to support the findings by Ofreneo, Portus, Serrano and Stiftung (2009: 46) that "traditional communication tools such as radio, popular theatre, and film were evidently the most effective tools in interacting with grassroots women." Thus, while the potential for these women to find better opportunities is certainly out there on the internet, their reliance on traditional means of seeking jobs and financial opportunities may cause them to miss out on significant opportunities available to them in the here and now.

3.6 Language Barrier

“Sometimes I cannot understand things from the internet when I’m trying to learn something new. The vocabulary is difficult for me. I have the same problem now (learning her husband’s native language)...that I did before in English. Sometimes I used Google Translate to help me but it wasn’t enough.”

(Respondent 15¹⁶, Interview, 13 October 2011)

I found this respondent comment to be particularly interesting and so I wanted to comment on it briefly. Respondent 15 above shared that she had often tried to learn English, and now her husband’s native language online. However, in searching in the foreign language, all of the results tended to be written in the foreign language. While she knows basic English and has taken a course in her husband’s native language, she is at best a beginning speaker in both languages, and her experience reading and writing outside her native language are also limited. Given that the language instruction she was trying to understand was being explained in a foreign language, how could she possibly understand anything but the most basic concepts? I have no doubt that language can be a limitation for any of these Isaan migrants trying to actively search and study in a foreign language online.

3.7 Lack of Feedback from Computers

When thinking about the many benefits of ICT4D, we must be careful to remember that technological devices *cannot* take the place of human beings in many aspects. For instance, those who study language on a computer or using a cd player may get better at listening to the language, but it does not necessarily improve their grammatical skills or their pronunciation.

¹⁶ This respondent is now married and living in a foreign country

Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011), while discussing the limitations of computers, remarks, “Computers themselves are not sufficient – they’re one way communication...they don’t provide interpersonal skills. For instance, a candidate may not dress professionally, or might have poor hygiene or poor communication skills- these will still hinder them from getting a job.” Computers also do not force candidates to show up on time or to remember appointments in the first place.

Thus, while technology can assist learning in many ways, it is important to remember that technology cannot do everything. Certain aspects of learning and development can only come from appropriate human and social interaction.

3.8 Mai Bpen Rai

Mai bpen rai is a common Thai phrase that roughly translates to “don’t worry about it” or “it’s not important.” For some, especially those in a state of development, it can have negative implications on their development process. Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) states that, “The *mai bpen rai* cultural attitude makes some of (the female Isaan migrants) afraid of change, afraid to get a new job. They might think that what they do now is good enough, and if they change, it may not be as good as before – right now they’re getting by.”

Fear of change is something that all of us face in our lives. We can especially understand this fear in the case of these Isaan migrants with few social safety nets protecting themselves and their families. Fear can protect us from danger; however, there are times when it can paralyze us and prevent us from succeeding. In the case of these Isaan migrants, this fear may keep them stuck in dead end jobs and prevent them from ever truly getting ahead.

3.9 Chapter Summary

In examining the migrant responses, we can divide them into two different types of issues. The first type relates to practical matters, where the responses may be taken at face value. For instance, the requirement by companies that candidates have real-world experience is a normal and reasonable requirement that businesses have, even though it causes difficulties for those in development trying to secure a better livelihood.

The remaining responses fall into a second category, where we can see the strong influence of the Maslow hierarchy of needs. Respondents raised issues relating to money, time and obligations to family. These issues speak directly to “Safety” level of the hierarchy - the security and stability of family life. The Mai Bpen Rai concept raised the notion of fear of change, which also addresses this area. These women do not wish to make changes which could possibly threaten the security of their family, even if it would ultimately lead to higher levels of actualization for themselves. If they are getting by now, and the basic needs of their family are being met, these women are often unwilling to risk the status quo, even if there is potential for economic improvement.

One respondent talked about social needs when studying. This area coincides with the “Love/Belonging” level of the Maslow hierarchy. As stated earlier, grassroots women like being able to discuss their views and share their opinions about a given subject (Ofreneo, Portus, Serrano and Stiftung, 2009: 57). For them, education is also a very social activity, and thus trying to study for a higher level degree online - sitting by themselves in front of a computer and lacking these social aspects – may fail to address this lower level social need.

Still another respondent talked laziness preventing her from continuing her education. Physiological reasons also affect decision making. The respondent’s “laziness” is really a reference to her being physically drained from working multiple jobs and being unmotivated to study, which speaks to the base level of the Maslow

hierarchy. This respondent was unwilling to make the effort of studying for a bachelor's degree knowing that it would bring on physical issues regarding sleep and energy during her pursuit of a degree.

In considering how to help these Isaan migrants reap the benefits of ICT4D, it is clear that things aren't as simple as offering them new job skills or having online coursework available. These things often aren't enough on their own. We must also consider how to address their underlying social, familial, and physical needs as well. Only then will they be able to fully realize the benefits of ICT4D.

Before moving into the next chapter, one final topic bears discussion. Earlier in this chapter we discussed the family obligations placed on these Isaan women. These obligations require them to sacrifice money, time, and in some cases their own physical well-being in order to help their family upcountry. In discussing women's empowerment, we must examine these family obligations with special consideration.

Sen's notion of women's empowerment involves "rectifying (the) many inequalities that blight the well-being of women and subject them to unequal treatment" (Sen, 1999: 190). The family obligations placed upon these women are imposed by cultural tradition, are quite burdensome, and are furthermore not similarly imposed on men. This could be considered the very definition of inequality and unequal treatment. Thus it would seem as if in order to be empowered, these women would have to disregard their cultural obligations to their family upcountry.

Yet in practice things are not so simple. To disregard these family obligations might leave the families upcountry without sufficient income to survive on a day-to-day basis. To disregard these obligations would be to reject cultural beliefs that have been ingrained in them since birth. These women *love* their families. They don't wish to see them suffer or go without their day to day needs. And they love their culture, even though in some cases cultural norms may work against them.

This is a difficult situation in development, where a group willingly chooses to follow cultural or religious norms which outsiders view as unfair or unjust. However, as long as such norms do not present any kind of danger to the physical or mental well-being of these women, it is not the place of this researcher or anyone else to tell these women how to live. As for ICT4D, what it *can* do is expand their knowledge about the world, show them how women in other societies live, and then let them make informed and free choices about what gender roles and responsibilities to accept.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS: How does ICT for Development expand the capabilities of female Isaan workers in Bangkok?

In the previous chapter, we discussed some of the difficulties that the Isaan women in Bangkok experienced in achieving the benefits of ICT4D. In this chapter, we will focus on the numerous benefits that these women actually achieved (their functionings) or felt that they could achieve (their capabilities). As with the previous chapter, we will discuss the most popular themes first, namely: knowledge, socializing, confidence and hope, work and access to work, future goals, entertainment, continuing education, access to money and finally *than samay*, the Thai word for being modern.

4.1 Knowledge

We noted in the last chapter that none of the migrant respondents had made any substantial progress in continuing their formal education online, and indeed that is a shame. However, while respondents may not have made much headway in the world of formal education, the response in terms of general world knowledge and knowledge related to work was overwhelming. This is indeed one of the expected benefits of ICT4D. Tella and Olorunfemi (2010: 115-116) note, “ICT could bring broad and in-depth information to those who have been hitherto denied such knowledge and thus opportunities for social and economic mobility.” Looking at the responses given by the migrants in this research, there is no doubt that ICT expands the capability and the actual functioning of these women with regards to knowledge access.

“I’ve found information on Google how make documents for work (Excel, Photoshop, advanced MS Word), including some accounting information needed for work.”

(Respondent 1a, Interview, 30 September 2011)

“I mostly use computers to learn English...”

(Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011)

“I use Google a lot for studying language and translation, and for looking at maps... (The internet) helps me learn things about the world, foreign cultures and people. When I was younger I really never had the opportunity to study about foreign cultures.”

(Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011)

“I have found websites to help make myself look better for work. I am very good at doing makeup now and usually help some of the other girls get ready for work as well.”

(Respondent 4¹⁷, Interview, 4 October 2011)

“I study English, and when I have foreign customers I use Google Translate, so I can communicate with customers from many countries...I read the news, and study about culture and interesting things from around the world. I also search for recipes and other things – anytime I want to know more about something, I will use the internet.”

(Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“I have read about hospitals and diseases because my mom is sick. I have read a lot about taking care of my mom’s health ...I (also) use the internet to look for information about beauty products and spas.”

(Respondent 8, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“The internet is very good. You can find everything, things you never knew before. I wanted to know how to cook Thai food, and now (that I’m abroad), I look on the internet, and I can make Thai food now. I could never cook anything in Thailand because I didn’t have time.”

(Respondent 15¹⁸, Interview, 13 October 2011)

¹⁷ Respondent 4 is currently working as a bar girl

These numerous examples were intended to demonstrate the wide variety of responses given by the migrant participants, ranging from using the internet to learn about Microsoft Office to learning how to cook or finding out about ways to take care of a sick mother. Menguita-Feranil (2009: 21-22), in her research about marginalized women along the Thai-Burmese border, found similar findings, saying that women used the internet for “(educational) information relevant to work and for self-education such as...educational music, English language (and) news updates.”

Respondent 3 in particular noted how learning about such things was impossible for her at a younger age, which I think speaks to the heart of the expansion of capability and functioning. Respondent 3 grew up in a small village in Nong Bua Lamphu along with 9 brothers and sisters. She didn't have so much as a landline at the time (Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011), so she was hard pressed to make a phone call, let alone find out about the cultures and peoples of foreign lands such as Europe or America.

The internet changed all that for her. The internet made the world's information available to her because of its ready accessibility and relative ease of use, especially when it comes to simply reading information. Seven years after she left Nong Bua Lamphu at the age of 18, she used the internet for the first time, and a whole new world of knowledge access opened up to her. Four years after that, with the help of her laptop, that knowledge became available to her without even leaving her apartment (Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011). Indeed, through the power of ICT4D, knowledge about “everything” (Respondent 15, Interview, 13 October 2011) is right at the fingertips of these women of Isaan.

¹⁸ This respondent is now married and living in a foreign country

4.2 *Socializing*

Earlier on, we noted that Thailand has roughly 1.03 cell phones per person in the country (Sullivan, 2010; UN Thailand, 2008), so it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that every migrant respondent mentioned that they stayed in touch with family via mobile phone. In her research on marginalized women, Menguita-Feranil (2009: 21) noted that, "Internet and mobile phone were instrumental tools in bringing and maintaining closer family ties ...despite their distance." In this research on female Isaan migrants in Bangkok, mobile phone usage was much more prevalent than internet usage to keep in touch with family members.

We should mention that the very presence of mobile phone technology itself is an expansion of the communication capabilities of these Isaan migrants. Of all the migrant respondents, only Respondent 10 (Interview, 7 October 2011) had a phone growing up. The low cost and ease of use of these mobile phones has made communication accessible for all of these migrant women. Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) adds, "There are even ways for people without money to send a free request for a collect call to family or friends." Thus, even though they live far away from their Isaan homes because of their work obligations, mobile phone technology allows them to maintain close contact with their families upcountry.

"I use Facebook and Skype to keep in touch with my boyfriend, and other friends."

(Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011)

"I have some friends overseas. I would send them emails and use Skype when I had a computer."

(Respondent 8, Interview, 7 October 2011)

Turning to making new friends or keeping in touch with existing friends or boyfriends, it seemed contact over the internet was also very popular, in particular with friends and boyfriends overseas. Making or keeping in touch with friends actually was the motivation for several of the women migrants to learn how to use computers. One respondent mentioned that she learned to use computers so she could do online chat (Respondent 1a, Interview, 30 September 2011), while another learned in order to send email to keep in touch with foreign friends (Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011). Still another mentioned that while she initially was exposed to computers while studying *Kor Sor Nor*¹⁹, she “never used (computers) outside of school until recently, to sign up for Facebook” (Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011).

On the topic of boyfriends in particular, Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) stated that, “Lots of (Isaan migrant) women use the internet to meet foreign or even Thai men, using websites or chat programs.” However, only Respondent 3 (Interview, 4 October 2011) admitted to searching for Thai boyfriends online, while Respondent 10 (Interview, 4 October 2011) stated that she was looking for a foreign husband online. Respondent 10 added though that she felt it was a little “dangerous” to meet on an internet chat, and would much rather meet her future foreign husband in person first (Respondent 10, Interview, 4 October 2011).

Several respondents, in talking about their dating lives with foreigners (present or past for the married ones) said that they would typically meet foreign men in person first, usually through work (Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011; Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011; Respondent 6, Interview, 6 October 2011; Respondent 15, Interview, 13 October 2011), as opposed to meeting them online. Once the foreign boyfriend would go back home, the respondents would then keep in touch via email and Skype, and occasionally through mobile phone or texting.

¹⁹ *Kor Sor Nor* refers to adult education in Thailand, in this case for a high school diploma

The story of Respondent 15 is particularly compelling. Her story is as follows:

“I kept in touch with my (future) husband over Skype and email for about two years. Occasionally I sent a regular letter. I met him in the massage shop²⁰, when he was traveling. He stopped into Bangkok, went to travel some more and then came back again to see me. At first we used email (to stay in touch after he went home) and then my friend told me about Skype. After that we stayed in touch by Skype and email. Sometimes we called on mobile phones. (I then asked if this would have been possible without technology)... Without technology, I don’t think we would have stayed in touch. We didn’t see each other for a long time – we only saw each other once per year, during his holiday. If we didn’t stay in touch online, maybe I would have forgotten him or he would have forgotten me. Regular letters I guess were possible but I’m not sure if they would have been enough, maybe if he sent pictures too. On Skype we used video. We talked maybe 4 or 5 times per week on Skype with video.

The second time we met, he came on holiday, we traveled together and then he went back home. About two months later, he asked me to marry him online. I said yes but I still had to wait another year for him to come back to see me again. He’s a very honest and straightforward guy.”

Respondent 15’s story, while perhaps not an everyday occurrence, details the incredible power of ICT4D. For her and for these other women, ICT4D greatly expands their ability to meet people and to maintain friendships and relationships. For friends in Thailand, they can be in touch instantaneously via cell phone or text message. If they don’t need an immediate response, they’re able to send an email or a message on Facebook.

²⁰ Respondent 15 is a former masseuse from the Khaosan Road Area in Bangkok

For friends overseas, the cost of calling via mobile or landline is substantial, and therefore in the past the cost made maintaining such relationships extremely difficult. The internet provides these Isaan migrants with an extremely low cost way of contacting friends and boyfriends who live at great distances, thus opening the door for continuing or even growing these relationships. Furthermore, as we saw in the case of Respondent 15, programs like Skype can provide an intimacy and an immediacy that standard mail simply cannot match, and at a cost that standard mail cannot compete with.

4.3 Confidence, Hope for the Future and Than Samay²¹

“My technology skills help me be more confident at work, because I am able to research about other cultures and countries, so I am more informed when I meet customers.”

(Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“(ICT skills improve my self-confidence) because I know I already have learned more than I knew in the past. And if I want to know things in the future, I know ICT can help me... I have already looked for information about opening a shop (in the future).”

(Respondent 7, Interview, 7 October 2011)

“When I was young I didn’t really use computers. Now I feel like my life has gotten better, because when I was younger I didn’t really have anything, including laptops.”

(Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011)

“...I have also used the internet a little to think about businesses in the future, such as opening a Thai restaurant overseas with my boyfriend.”

(Respondent 3, Interview, 4 October 2011)

²¹ *Than samay* is the Thai word for being modern

Technological skills, even at the most beginner level, seemed to make an impact on these women in terms of how they feel about themselves and their possibilities in the future. With regards to the capability approach, these feelings of confidence alter the personal characteristics noted in the commodity conversion factors earlier. Indeed, the *belief* that one can succeed and achieve goals goes a long way to allowing one to reach one's goals.

Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) explains, "Computer skills probably don't directly affect self-confidence. However, once (the Isaan migrant women) acquire new skills and use them in real life – then they may experience a boost in confidence. We had a student who recently bought her first airline ticket online, and she was very proud of that."

Respondent 7 above stated that she already realizes how much her technological skills have increased, even though she just recently started using computers and is certainly a beginner. She continued on to say, "Technology helps me to feel *than samay* – I didn't really feel that way before" (Respondent 7, Interview, 7 October 2011). Respondent 15 (Interview, 13 October 2011) similarly mentioned *than samay*, saying "I think technology, the internet is the future, we have to be *than samay*."

Mills (1997: 42) talked about the Isaan – Bangkok migration of these women as being in part motivated by the desire to "to participate in Thai modernity" and to be *than samay* – the Thai word for "up-to-date". This concept at the time of Mills' research primarily referred to displays of wealth, status and consumption, with Mills explaining that "the ownership and display of new technologies and consumer commodities are increasingly valued as symbols of modern success and social status throughout Thailand" (Mills, 1997: 42).

However, I believe the present day sense of being *than samay* may have evolved somewhat. While I have no doubt that showing off the latest gadgets is still important to

many of these women as well as others throughout Thai society (and the world for that matter), these respondents here are not talking about displaying the latest iPad. They are referring to the *knowledge and ability* to use computers and the internet. Some of these women come from natal homes which lacked electricity (Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011; Respondent 8, Interview, 7 October 2011), which may have given them the feeling of being simple “rice and upland crop farmers” (Mills, 1997: 49). The ability to use computers, to buy airline tickets online, to research online for a future business – these abilities boost the confidence of these women which helps them in all aspects of their life to achieve functionings. They also help these women achieve one very specific and important functioning – that of feeling like a modern and equal member of society.

4.4 Work and Access to Work

During our interview, Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) stated that some of the students at Goodwill “prefer to look for jobs on (physical) bulletin boards,” highlighting the fact that some of these Isaam migrant women prefer more traditional ways of looking for work such as bulletin boards, classified ads in the newspaper or simply seeing a job posting while commuting around the city.

While most of the respondents hadn’t used the internet to search for new work, all of them were aware of the ability to do so, and two of the respondents had in fact looked for work using more modern technological means. Respondent 5 (Interview, 6 October 2011) stated that, “I know I can look for jobs online, and find out what qualifications are necessary for those jobs. If I am qualified, I know I can send my CV over to them. If they are interested, I will interview with that company. I have used the internet in the past to look for jobs,” and Respondent 8 (Interview, 7 October 2011) also noted that she had previously applied for jobs online.

But ICT4D doesn’t stop with simply helping these women search online job postings. Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) further informed us that,

“(Isaan migrant women) also will use the mobile phone to sell things now. For instance, some students work in a factory, and they may call their hometown to (order) products (to sell to) friends at work. For instance, Isaan sausages have been sold a lot in the past.” And Respondent 8 (Interview, 7 October 2011) added that, “Sometimes friends call me with part time work or special projects on my day off.”

Improving economic opportunities is one of the key elements of empowerment. The respondents in this research indicated that ICT4D did expand their capability to find better job opportunities, as a very easy quick and efficient outlet for searching for work that a few respondents were already taking advantage of. Furthermore, the mobile phone in particular seemed particularly useful in helping Isaan migrants find side work to supplement the income from their main jobs.

Some of the respondents may have been hindered in this area due to lack of computer skills or perhaps an underlying worry relating to their lack of formal education, as discussed in the previous chapter. In the next chapter, we shall discuss some ways to further improve the ability of these women to reach full functioning with regards to work access through ICT4D.

4.5 Entertainment

“I mostly use the internet for playing games before and after work.”

(Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011)

“When I am stressed, I use the computer for entertainment... (I) listen to music, and watch videos, and it helps me have fun.”

(Respondent 5, Interview, 6 October 2011)

“I search the internet, read the news and other things about planning for the future, but mostly (just use the computer) for fun.”

(Respondent 15, Interview, 13 October 2011)

Entertainment is probably not the first area that comes to mind when discussing women's empowerment. Yet, Robeyns (2003: 6) specifically identifies "resting", as a functioning, and by extension it is very reasonable to see that being entertained is a functioning as well.

The demographic data listed in Appendix C indicates that 13 of the 15 migrants work 6 or 7 days per week. In other words, these women work extremely hard. They're tired and stressed from work. It is important to recall that development and women's empowerment don't necessarily relate to economic improvement – they relate to women being free to choose the things they want to do with their lives. And in some cases, that involves sitting down in front of a computer after a hard day's work and unwinding by playing a computer game or listening to music. Computers and other technological devices clearly assist these women in achieving the functioning of being entertained and relaxing.

4.6 Continuing Education

In the previous chapter, we discussed in detail the fact that none of the respondents have been able to successfully attain a bachelor's degree, in spite of the availability of online studying at open universities in Thailand such as Ramkamhaeng and Sukhothai Thammathirat.

However, in talking about the capabilities approach, we have to discuss not necessarily what these women actually achieved, but whether or not they *could* achieve a given functioning using their existing resources. In this case, one would have to argue that at least some of these women *could* achieve this functioning. For instance, as we saw earlier, Respondent 2 (Interview, 2 October 2011) stated, "Well, I'm a little lazy to study and I feel like I'm too old. I thought about it before but I didn't have time back then. Now I have more time because I have a day off but I'm too lazy."

While it's hard to believe that Respondent 2 is "lazy", the fact is that she works hard, is tired, and likely lacks the *motivation* to commit to studying for the next several years. It is certainly hard for anyone to go back to school after years of being in the work force, let alone when one is working a full time job. However, this still seems to be a *choice* not to go, more so than her being unable to go.

That being said, there are certainly steps that would make going back to school easier for some of these women. We shall discuss this topic further in the following chapter.

4.7 Access to Money

Access to money within this research refers to the ability to get money in ways other than through work, typically through borrowing money or simply asking for money from a friend, boyfriend or loved one. Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) tells us that for these Isaan women "mobile phone is probably the easiest way...to (contact) friends, family or boyfriends and ask for money. Using the phone (Isaan migrant women) might ask anyone they know for money. They may also send texts to their foreign boyfriends... Some women who have foreign boyfriends may use the internet or email to ask for money. I think this is a normal occurrence."

We might also call this access to money access to *credit*, which is a typical indicator of women's empowerment (Maholtra, Schuler and Boender, 2002: 13). Here we must note that "credit" in the context of this research refers only to borrowing through informal means, not through authorized financial institutions. This research must also note here that control over said credit and other financial resources, which is a problem for some disempowered women, did not seem to be an issue for any of the migrant respondents in this research.

ICT4D did certainly increase access to informal credit and other financial resources which did not require repayment due to the nature of the relationship between the migrant respondent and the “lender”. Respondent 5 (Interview, 6 October 2011) revealed that she has “used (her mobile) phone to borrow money from (her) mom, but not often.” Respondent 3 (Interview, 4 October 2011) has used her mobile phone to “to ask for money from both (her) family and (her) boyfriend.”

Respondent 2 was able to acquire a fairly significant amount of money from her foreign boyfriend using ICT4D, which she is not expected to pay back. She met her boyfriend at the massage shop she works at, and now she has a small business selling clothes near her old massage shop (which she still works at part time). She started her business recently using the capital received from her boyfriend. Her story is as follows:

“We kept in touch over email and sometimes Skype. I would use Google translate if I didn’t understand (his) email or I wanted to use the right word in English. I asked him for money to start a business (via email). He sent a lot of money (about \$3000 USD). Now I send him (text messages) and pictures every day on the phone. It’s been several months since first meeting him. I don’t think I would have gotten money if I didn’t have the internet and my mobile (phone) because I would have no way to keep in touch or understand him.”

(Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011)

The ability to access money when needed, for emergency expenditure or for longer term plans such as starting a business or going back to school, is extremely empowering for these Isaan women. For day-to-day needs, access to money gives them to choice to buy necessary items without having to sacrifice due to short term monetary constraints.

For longer term plans, this access can even be life changing. For instance, while Respondent 2 only opened her street business recently, she has already exceeded the daily

income from her previous job as a masseuse, with her new work being much less physically demanding (Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011). If her business continues to do well, the long term implications from this increase in income are substantial. She could continue to grow her existing business or perhaps start a new one, such as the convenience store which she hopes to open someday (Respondent 2, Interview, 2 October 2011). The key is that what she does in the future will be completely up to her. That freedom of choice is the ultimate form of empowerment.

4.8 Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter, we saw that migrants had difficulties in achieving some of the benefits of ICT4D when family, social or physical needs prevented them from doing so. In this chapter, we saw that when not shackled by such hindrances, these migrants were able to achieve functionings all the way to highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy.

One very common response was that ICT4D helped them gain knowledge. Not just practical knowledge, but knowledge that they desired to satisfy their curiosities about the world- knowledge about different cultures, languages, health care and cooking. These curiosities in some cases had gone unfulfilled for a long time, only being satisfied through the power of ICT4D. Respondents also reported gains in self-confidence and hope for the future, now believing that higher levels of achievement were possible when perhaps their goals seemed out of reach before. They even found more ways to enjoy themselves via things like online games, music and videos. All of these are higher order achievements relating to personal fulfillment, emotional well-being, happiness and "maximizing one's unique potential in life" (Zalenski and Raspa, 2006: 1121), going well beyond simply meeting basic human needs.

Respondents reaped many social and economic benefits. Respondents used ICT4D to maintain friendships and personal relationships with boyfriends in order to

fulfill their “Love/ Belonging” needs, now being empowered to connect like never before. They likewise found ICT4D useful in seeking new work and new sources of income in order to provide for the security and stability of their families.

We can see then that in areas where no lower order needs or practical obstacles such as language barriers restrained them, these Isaan migrants were in fact able to make great use of ICT4D. They expanded their active functionings wherever possible, even to the highest levels of the Maslow hierarchy. There seems to be no question then about the power of ICT4D in furthering development.

Yet, it is important to recognize that empowerment involves “rectifying (the) many inequalities that blight the well-being of women and subject them to unequal treatment” (Sen, 1999: 190). Thus, we must raise the question – to what extent has ICT4D rectified said inequalities in the lives of these Isaan women?

ICT4D certainly *reduced* the level of inequality they experience, allowing them to work around some of the inequality which has affected their lives. It helped them access knowledge previously denied to them. It improved their access to work and capital. ICT4D helped these Isaan women build self-confidence and hope for the future. It afforded them the opportunity to study for a bachelor’s degree online. It even helped them improve their options in finding and choosing a boyfriend or spouse. These are all major benefits that greatly improve their choices in life and expand their possibilities for the future.

But as discussed earlier, ICT4D is not a panacea for all the inequalities facing these women. For one thing, while ICT4D helped these women find and build relationships with boyfriends or potential spouses, in some cases this can *perpetuate* inequality. Respondent 10 (Interview, 7 October 2011) stated that, “I’m always looking for a good way to support myself; I want to have a foreign husband.” Respondent 2

(Interview, 2 October 2011) asked her boyfriend for money to start her business rather than saving it on her own.

We should not be judgmental with these women. Respondent 10 is a single mother and it's not easy for anyone to raise a child on their own. And Respondent 2 would likely have had to work for many years to save the amount of money her boyfriend gave her. But in terms of women's empowerment, these actions surely go against the concept of women's agency, as these two respondents sought out men to help them out of their current situation.

A second reality we must face is that ICT4D cannot turn back the hands of time. ICT4D cannot give back the precious time lost working when these women should have been studying in high school or university. It cannot give back the years they spent scraping by doing menial informal sector jobs should they finish their bachelor's degree later in life. Nor can ICT4D replace money sent to their families upcountry that could have been used to buy a new laptop.

Thus while the benefits of ICT4D are manifold, ICT4D cannot realistically overcome every inequality facing these Isaan women- sometimes the inequalities are too deeply rooted in their lives. What ICT4D can do is allow them to make the best of present circumstances - attaining equality in whatever areas possible, and working around obstacles in cases where full equality is not within reach.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This research set out to understand the way in which ICT4D affects the lives and capabilities of female Isaan migrants in Bangkok. These women came to Bangkok in search of ways to support their families and improve their lives, leaving behind the underdevelopment of their natal homes, but carrying with them some of the problems that their background of poverty caused, particularly in the area of formal education. Under the framework of the capability approach, and via stories about their life experiences, these migrants have illustrated for us ways in which ICT4D positively impacts their lives, allowing them to work around or overcome some of the obstacles which hinder them.

It is clear from the experiences shared by these Isaan women that ICT4D helped them in many ways. ICT4D provided outlets for them to access knowledge which had eluded them most of their lives. ICT4D greatly extended their ability to maintain and build familial and external relationships, with one respondent even receiving (and accepting) a marriage proposal online. ICT4D also helped these Isaan migrants to build the confidence and hope that they could be successful, both now and in achieving future goals. In some cases ICT4D even helped them find the funding to achieve those goals. In achieving these benefits, ICT4D helped these women achieve greater equality in society in terms of economic and social opportunities, and personal and emotional well-being, with their successes reaching the highest level of the Maslow hierarchy.

But while ICT4D did provide many benefits for these women, respondents expressed concerns about areas where ICT4D was not enough to correct some of the inequalities which had affected them for so long. Some issues had to do with practical problems, such as certain jobs requiring levels of work experience that these Isaan migrants simply do not possess. Others had to do with the requirements needed to achieve *potential* benefits of ICT4D threatening lower order needs identified in Maslow's hierarchy, such as family stability or physiological well-being. These lower order needs seemed to be a very important determining factor. When no threats to lower order needs

were present, the Isaan migrants were able to use ICT4D to achieve functionings at the upper level of the Maslow hierarchy. When such threats were present, these women were seemingly unwilling to make any changes to their situation.

This research also set out to identify these types of problem areas and make recommendations to address them. In doing so, we shall take into account both lower order needs issues as well as some of the more practical obstacles preventing these Isaan migrants from fully achieving the benefits of ICT4D.

Recommendation 1: Motivate these women to continue their education by providing financial incentives, day care, and more programs that cater to women.

The inability of ICT4D to help these women continue with their higher education was the most glaring issue identified during the research. As stated earlier, not a single migrant respondent has made any significant progress towards a bachelor's degree, in spite of the current development discourse claiming higher education access as a benefit of ICT4D (Evans²², 1995: 1).

The respondents in this research brought up time and energy constraints from work and family obligations as a big issue. Several alluded to cost, even though cost did not seem to be a deciding factor in and of itself. And Respondent 1b (Interview, 5 October 2011) mentioned a need for a teacher and some issues with vocabulary, while at the same time hinting at a need for more socializing in her studies. All of these issues seem to reflect lower order social or familial stability needs being threatened, and thus by reducing these threats these women may be able to further their formal education.

Financial incentives are one easy way the government could facilitate this. However, I would not simply provide scholarship money for these women, though certainly that would be part of the solution. I would also provide financial incentives via

²² Evans is citing Trivedi's 1989 work *Women's development through Distance Education*

tax breaks or other financial arrangements to businesses which employ these women, on the condition that these women are allowed to leave early once or twice a week to allow them extra time to study. This would alleviate some of the time pressure these women feel from work responsibilities. Providing vouchers for these women to use specified day care centers could further reduce time constraints for these women which result from family obligations.

As for the concerns of Respondent 1a, Evans (1995: 11) notes that “‘Woman-friendly’ materials and social interaction and peer support” go a long way in facilitating women’s participation in distance education²³. Minor adjustments in program curriculum to cater specifically to this audience could help in this area. Also, semi-regular classroom meetings or online discussions via Skype could assist these women in sharing their opinions and thoughts about course material, thus addressing their need for a more social learning environment.

Why should the government take these additional steps? The Thai government has already done a fantastic job expanding the technology infrastructure within the country. The Thai government has further expressed goals of “(expanding) and developing learning through ICT media, such as distance learning via satellite and the Internet” and “(promoting) information and knowledge development that enhances the quality of community life by utilizing ICT in areas such as lifelong education.” (APCICT, n.d.d: 11-12). Yet, these women are still unable to take advantage of distance learning to get their university degree. A little extra effort on the part of the government could see these goals to fruition, and open the doors for a large group of women to finally attain a bachelor’s degree – thus building a much more savvy and well-educated work force.

²³ Evans is talking about facilitating women’s participation in distance learning for technology education in particular, though it seems relevant for distance learning in general as well

Recommendation 2: Provide accredited certifications which can be used to demonstrate skills and which can be accepted by employers in lieu of experience.

Another major concern for these women was a lack of experience should they want to attain higher end work. While some of them have acquired skills via online training, they still felt that their experience wasn't legitimate, because companies would not accept whatever training they had.

Microsoft provides a good example of how to address this issue. Microsoft (n.d.) offers various certifications for technology workers, certifications which "provide objective validation of (a person's) ability to perform more advanced and critical business". This model could be followed for other industries, allowing women without regular experience who have gained knowledge through online coursework and distance learning to objectively prove the scope of their knowledge in a given field. Once these women attained such certifications, companies could then hire them with confidence and rigid experience requirements could be dropped.

Recommendation 3: Provide more advertising on TV and radio for job seekers, and encourage companies to make special note of jobs not requiring bachelor's degrees in their advertisements.

A majority of the respondents stated that they had never used the internet to search for jobs. While some of that may have been the result of the respondents feeling their computer skills were insufficient, Unyawachsomrith (Interview, 2 October 2011) advised that, "(Isaan migrant women) may not consider even looking on the internet. TV is probably a more effective way of reaching these women," due to the fact that they were accustomed to more traditional ways of looking for jobs such as reading (physical) bulletin boards.

Even still beyond that, I would imagine that after finding themselves unqualified for job postings time and again, these women might give up on trying to find higher end

work and only apply for lower jobs or informal sector work, where they know that a bachelor's degree is not required. That being said, some of these women do not lack for skill – only a bachelor's degree.

Consequently, if companies wish to hire some of the more skilled workers from this large pool of labor, it would make sense for them to follow the advice of Unyawachsomrith above and advertise on TV, where these women are more likely to see the ads. Furthermore, calling out within the advertisements any positions that do not require a bachelor's degree will likely pique the interest of these women and lead them to follow up.

Recommendation 4: Provide more funding for adult computer education courses around Bangkok, and advertising for education centers that do exist.

In Chapter 3, it was identified that several respondents felt that their computer skills weren't particularly good, thus hindering their ability to access the benefits of information technology. Respondent 4 also stated that while she had learned to use computers in high school, she didn't really use them in the real world until very recently, after many years had passed (Respondent 4, Interview, 4 October 2011).

Based on this empirical evidence, I would venture to say that there are many Isaan migrants in Bangkok who are in a similar position, possessing minimal computer skills but not knowing how to improve them. While some of the respondents were able to learn basic computer skills at Goodwill, others had to rely on friends or sometimes strangers at computer shops to learn whatever minimal skills they possessed. None of the respondents mentioned any place where they could learn basic computer skills for free, other than Goodwill. While I imagine a few such places exist, the respondents were not aware of such places, meaning that these places are not well advertised.

And that is certainly a tragedy. As stated earlier, Thailand has done a fantastic job building out technological infrastructure as part of its ICT4D policy. But for some of

these women, even if they learned how to use computers in school, they haven't taken advantage of their benefits until external forces such as Goodwill, boyfriends or cultural trends like Facebook pushed them to do so. Providing low cost or free classes for adults around Bangkok, and advertising these classes *and their benefits* on TV and radio, can create an environment where young and old alike can reap the benefits of modern technology. And in doing so, Thailand can strengthen its workforce and make the country more technologically competitive with the likes of Singapore and South Korea. All that's required is a little more effort than what's being done at present.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MIGRANT RESPONDENTS

Interview Location (Sukhumvit Area, Silom Area, or Khaosan Area)

Date:

Age:

Marital Status:

Birth Province:

Current Job:

Working Days per Week:

Establish Background of Disempowerment and Background of ICT usage

1. Please state your highest level of formal education
2. Did you or any of your siblings have to leave school early to work to help support the family?
3. Do you have to support anyone here or at home?
4. How old were you when u first started working?
5. What was your first job in BKK?
6. Growing up, did your family have TV? Cable? Landline or cell phone?
7. How old were you the first time you owned a cell phone?
8. How old were you the first time you used the internet?
9. How old were you the first time you were able to use a computer?
10. How old were you the first time you owned a computer?
11. How did you learn to use a computer?
12. How long have you studied at Goodwill? (Goodwill students only)

Education and Learning

13. Does ICT help you learn things that you previously didn't know and had no easy way to learn?

Work and Finances

14. Do you need a computer for work?
15. Do you think ICT increases your access to work (because of new skills) or being able to find a job more easily?
16. Does ICT help you access funds more easily (from family, husband/boyfriend, etc), to use for daily expenditure or for the future (business/activities or increase in savings)?
17. Does ICT affect you in terms of your planning your finances for now or the future?
18. Does ICT help you find sources of income outside of your normal job?

Goals and Dreams

19. What things are important to you in your life, what topics do you think about often?
20. What goals do you have for the future?
21. Does ICT help you achieve those goals?

Social Aspects

22. Does ICT help you stay in touch with family and friends?
23. Does ICT help you meet potential new spouses/boyfriends?
24. Do you feel the knowledge you've gained from your ICT skills has improved your self-confidence or self-image?
25. Does ICT help you do to do anything else that you want to do that we haven't talked about?

Barriers to Success

26. Do you feel there are any hindrances in your life to accessing ICT or in using your new abilities to improve your life and to do other things you want to do?
27. *What prevents you from going back to school to continue your education?

*Please note this question was added after the first interview

APPENDIX B**MIGRANT RESPONDENT LIST AND INTERVIEW DATES**

- Migrant 1a. Interview. 30 September 2011.
- Migrant 1b. Interview. 5 October 2011.
- Migrant 2. Interview. 2 October 2011.
- Migrant 3. Interview. 4 October 2011.
- Migrant 4. Interview. 4 October 2011.
- Migrant 5. Interview. 6 October 2011.
- Migrant 6. Interview. 6 October 2011.
- Migrant 7. Interview. 7 October 2011.
- Migrant 8. Interview. 7 October 2011.
- Migrant 9. Interview. 7 October 2011.
- Migrant 10. Interview. 7 October 2011.
- Migrant 11. Interview. 7 October 2011.
- Migrant 12. Interview. 7 October 2011.
- Migrant 13. Interview. 8 October 2011.
- Migrant 14. Interview. 8 October 2011.
- Migrant 15. Interview. 13 October 2011.

Please note: A few dates have been altered to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

APPENDIX C

MIGRANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Migrant Ages:

| | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Migrant 1, Age 24 | Migrant 9, Age 33 |
| Migrant 2, Age 29 | Migrant 10, Age 35 |
| Migrant 3, Age 29 | Migrant 11, Age 35 |
| Migrant 4, Age 30 | Migrant 12, Age 35 |
| Migrant 5, Age 30 | Migrant 13, Age 38 |
| Migrant 6, Age 31 | Migrant 14, Age 40 |
| Migrant 7, Age 32 | Migrant 15, Age 40 |
| Migrant 8, Age 33 | |

Migrant Worker Jobs: Office Workers (4), Masseuse (1), Bar Girls (2), Travel Agent (1), Computer Shop Manager (1), Nanny (4), Spa Worker (1), Street Vendor (1)*

Migrant Worker Working Days per Week: Five (2), Six (9), Seven (4)

Migrant Worker Marital Statuses: Single (5), Married (4), Widowed (2), Divorced (3), Separated (1)

Migrant Workers with Children (Single Mothers): 9 (6)

Goodwill or former Goodwill students: 9 women

Please note: The demographic information has been listed in this fashion in order to protect the anonymity of the respondents. The ages of the respondents listed above have been ordered sequentially rather than matched with the actual respondent.

* The Street Vendor also works at a nearby massage shop part time

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR NGO/DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

RESPRESENTATIVES

Interview Location:

Date:

Name:

Agency:

Position:

Education and Learning

1. Does ICT help these Isaan migrant women learn things that they previously didn't know and had no easy way to learn?

Work and Finances

2. Do you think ICT increases their access to work (because of new skills) or being able to find a job more easily?
3. Does ICT help them access funds more easily (from family, husband/boyfriend, etc), to use for daily expenditure or for the future (business/activities or increase in savings)?
4. Does ICT affect them in terms of planning their finances for now or the future?
5. Does ICT help them find sources of income outside of their normal job?

Social Aspects

6. Does ICT help these women stay in touch with family and friends?
7. Does ICT help these women meet potential new spouses/boyfriends?
8. Do ICT skills improve their self-confidence or self-image?

9. Can you think of other ways ICT helps these women expand their capabilities in life or do the things they want to do that we haven't talked about?

Barriers to Success

10. What hindrances are there for these women in accessing ICT or in using their new abilities to improve their lives and to do the things they want to do?

APPENDIX E**LIST OF KEY INFORMANTS FROM NGO/DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES**

Emma Germanos

(Former) Vocational Training Manager

Goodwill Group Foundation

Interviewed 8 December 2011

Sarochinee Unyawachsomrith

Program Director

Goodwill Group Foundation

Interviewed 2 October 2011

BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Clifford was born in New York on January 2, 1974. His father bought a computer for his family at an early age, sparking an interest in technology that led to him studying Computer Science at the University of Southern California. Mr. Clifford spent the early part of his career as an IT specialist working in large Fortune 500 companies. In early 2008, he decided to make a change and do something different with his life. He moved to Bangkok and began a career as an English teacher. Soon afterwards, he joined Goodwill Group Foundation, an NGO that helps underprivileged women in Thailand improve their life opportunities through educational and vocational training. His experiences at Goodwill Group Foundation inspired him to partake in the Master of Arts in International Development Studies (MAIDS) program at Chulalongkorn University, the finest university in Thailand.