

Feminization, Vulnerability, and Empowerment of Laotian
Migrant Women in Thailand



A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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การขยายตัวของแรงงานหญิงความเปราะบางและการเพิ่มอำนาจของแรงงานหญิงลาวข้ามชาติใน
ประเทศไทย



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วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ศึกษาการขยายตัวขนาดใหญ่ของแรงงานหญิงลาวข้ามชาติที่ย้ายถิ่นมาทำงานในประเทศไทย และมุ่งพัฒนาข้อเสนอแนะเชิงนโยบายที่จะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อแรงงานหญิงที่ทำงานในประเทศไทย โดยใช้แรงงานหญิงลาวเป็นกรณีศึกษา การศึกษาครั้งนี้ได้อธิบายการขยายตัวของกระบวนการย้ายถิ่นของแรงงานหญิง และเงื่อนไขทางเพศภาวะที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเปราะบางในกลุ่มแรงงานหญิงลาวข้ามชาติที่ทำงานสำหรับแรงงานหญิงในประเทศไทย ภายใต้แนวคิดการขยายตัวของแรงงานหญิง ความเปราะบาง และการเพิ่มอำนาจของผู้หญิง และการใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ เก็บข้อมูลโดยใช้แบบสัมภาษณ์แบบมีโครงสร้าง ผู้ให้ข้อมูล ประกอบด้วย แรงงานหญิงลาวจำนวน 11 คน มีทั้งคนที่ทำงานรับใช้ในบ้าน แรงงานในภาคเกษตร ภาคบริการ และแรงงานในโรงงานอุตสาหกรรมสิ่งทอ นอกจากนี้ยังได้สัมภาษณ์ผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญ 13 คน ด้วยแบบสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง โดยผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญ ประกอบด้วย นายจ้าง แกนนำเครือข่ายแรงงานข้ามชาติ นักวิชาการและผู้เชี่ยวชาญด้านการย้ายถิ่น ผลการศึกษา พบว่า แรงงานหญิงลาวตกอยู่ในภาวะเปราะบาง เนื่องจากได้รับการเลือกปฏิบัติทางเพศในการทำงานสำหรับผู้หญิง และจะยังคงอยู่ในสภาวะเปราะบางมากยิ่งขึ้นในกรณีที่เป็นแรงงานนอกระบบ นอกเหนือไปจากสถานการณ์ลักลอบเข้าเมืองแบบผิดกฎหมายผ่านช่องทางไม่เป็นทางการ และเอกสารที่นำติดตัวมายังประเทศไทยแล้ว ความเปราะบางของกลุ่มแรงงานหญิงลาวจะเพิ่มสูงขึ้นเมื่อพวกเขาต้องครคร์โดยไม่สามารถเข้าถึงสิทธิในการทำคลอดและเงินช่วยเหลือในการเลี้ยงดูบุตร นอกจากนี้ การศึกษาครั้งนี้ยังได้ค้นพบว่า แรงงานหญิงลาวข้ามชาติในภาคการเกษตรและคนรับใช้ในบ้าน คือกลุ่มที่มีความเปราะบางมากที่สุด เนื่องจากแรงงานหญิงลาวข้ามชาติที่ทำงานอยู่ในทั้ง 4 ประเภทงาน มีประสบการณ์ได้รับการเพิ่มอำนาจในระดับที่แตกต่างกัน แต่กลุ่มที่เปราะบางที่สุด คือ กลุ่มที่ได้รับการเพิ่มอำนาจในฐานะผู้หญิงในระดับที่ต่ำที่สุด ข้อค้นพบเหล่านี้นำไปสู่ข้อเสนอว่า มีความจำเป็นในการเพิ่มอำนาจให้แก่กลุ่มแรงงานหญิงลาวข้ามชาติให้มากยิ่งขึ้น และลดความเปราะบางโดยอาศัยความร่วมมือระหว่างผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียกลุ่มต่าง ๆ ได้แก่ นายจ้าง แกนนำเครือข่ายแรงงานข้ามชาติ นักวิชาการ ผู้เชี่ยวชาญ ตลอดจนผู้แทนจากองค์กรประชาสังคมและองค์กรระหว่างประเทศ ความร่วมมือนี้จะเป็นก้าวแรกในการพัฒนาการเคลื่อนย้ายข้ามแดนของแรงงานหญิงลาว และช่วยให้แรงงานหญิงลาวเหล่านี้ได้รับการคุ้มครองตามสิทธิแรงงานและนโยบายของรัฐมากยิ่งขึ้น

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This thesis examines the feminization of large-scale, cross-border labour migration of Laotian women who migrate to Thailand for work, and aims to effect useful labour migration policy changes for all migrant women working in Thailand, using Laotian migrant women as a case study. This thesis explicates the feminization process and its gendered implications on Laotian migrant women's vulnerability working in feminized work sectors in Thailand, using the main concepts of feminization of migration, vulnerability, and gender empowerment. This thesis focuses on qualitative research design, using structured qualitative interviews with 11 Laotian migrant women in domestic work, agricultural work, services work, and garment factory work, and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 13 key informants, namely employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts in the field of migration. This thesis argues that Laotian migrant women are made vulnerable as they are subjected to gender discrimination in feminized work sectors. They are made more vulnerable when they work in feminized work sectors that are also informal work, in addition to their illegal migrant status, the unofficial way in which they entered Thailand, and the type of documentation which they brought to Thailand. Their vulnerability heightens when they are pregnant and lack access to maternity and childcare. This thesis concludes that Laotian migrant women in agricultural work and domestic work are the most vulnerable. Hence, Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors experience different degrees of gender empowerment, with the most vulnerable groups as being the least empowered as women. This thesis posits that it is important to further empower Laotian migrant women and reduce their vulnerability through multiple stakeholder collaboration with employers, migrant network leaders, academics, experts, and representatives of civil society and international organizations. This serves as a first step in advancing Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility and enables them to be better protected in terms of labour rights and policy as migrant women.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLMV	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GEI	Gender Equity Index
GGI	Gender Gap Index
GSI	Gender Status Index
ID	Identity Document
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LAK	Lao Kip
MMN	Mekong Migration Network
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USD	United States Dollars

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present my research by providing the context and background to my research focus, followed by going through my research methodology and research limitations.

1.1 Introduction and Problem Statement

Since the 1990s, Thailand has largely depended on large-scale labour migration from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), and Myanmar. Thailand has since benefited much from large-scale labour migration in a relatively short span of time, as large-scale labour migration contributed to its rapid economic growth over the last three decades. According to United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019:9), "as of November 2018, the statistics available place the total non-Thai population in Thailand at approximately 4.9 million, which includes 3.9 million migrant workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam...migrant workers constitute over 10 per cent of Thailand's labour force of 38.7 million." This is evident of Thailand's high dependence on large-scale labour migration from its neighboring countries, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, to support its economy.

The role of large-scale labour migration from Thailand's neighbouring countries on Thai economy is more pertinent than ever, due to the increasing ageing population in Thailand. United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019:10) stated that "the proportion of older persons (aged 60 years and over) in Thailand continues to grow, constituting approximately 16 per cent of the population in 2017, and is expected to increase to over 35 per cent by 2050." This suggests that in the near future, Thailand will face a large gap of able and fit workers. Hence, Thailand will have a stronger reliance on large-scale labour migration from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, to fill up the gap of able and fit workers created by the ageing population in Thailand.

My research focuses on large-scale cross-border labour migration from Laos to Thailand, particularly the influx of Laotian migrant women into Thailand, in the

larger context of Thailand's dependence on large-scale labour migration for its economy due to its ageing population. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) (2019), "it is estimated that there are 1.3 million Lao nationals living abroad, of whom 54 per cent are women." The phenomenon is that there is a significant number of Laotian migrant women coming to Thailand primarily for work. This suggests that slightly more than half of the migrant workers coming from Laos to Thailand are women, which when taken into account the sheer volume of the number of Laotian migrant workers coming into Thailand, is not a small number when taken into account the fact that Laos has the highest labour migration into Thailand compared to Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019) also reported that "Thailand is the largest destination for women migrants. Women represent slightly more than half (50.2 per cent) of the migrant population in Thailand (UNDESA, 2017)." This suggests that there is a significant number of Laotian migrant women based in Thailand.

My research aims to examine cross-border labour migration process of Laotian female migrant workers in Thailand. I seek to identify factors to improve Laotian migrant women's circumstances living and working in Thailand. My research's problem statement focuses on the challenges and disadvantages that Laotian migrant women face when living and working in Thailand, in the context of cross-border mobility and feminization of transnational migration. My research seeks to explicate the rationale behind why there are so many Laotian migrant women coming to work in Thailand, using the concept of feminization of transnational migration. My research focuses on the vulnerability of Laotian migrant women due to their positionality as women, namely in terms of wage differentials, weak labour protection rights and policy, and doing unskilled or low-skilled work. I explore how Laotian migrant women's vulnerable situation of doing unskilled and or low-skilled work in gender-specific and informal work sectors with weaker labour protection and lower pay could be reduced using the concept of gender empowerment, which will be elaborated in Chapter 4.

I explore economic push and pull factors that contribute to the phenomenon of many Laotian migrant women who leave Laos to work in Thailand. As an overview, there is a lack of jobs for Laotian women in Laos and a demand for cheap low-skilled

and or unskilled migrant labour for Thailand's economy with an ageing population. The wages that Laotian migrant women earn while working in Thailand are approximately two to three times more than what they would earn back in Laos, which attracts Laotian migrant women to continue coming to Thailand to work. However, Laotian migrant women often find themselves working in gender-specific jobs in Thailand, which further perpetuates wage differentials, having weaker labour protection rights and policy, and doing unskilled and or low-skilled work. Laotian migrant women who travel from Laos to Thailand are often in search of better economic opportunities. However, upon reaching Thailand, they face labour issues perpetuated by gender discrimination in feminized work sectors. I thus emphasize the importance of empowering Laotian migrant women through education and skills, so as to facilitate their cross-border mobility by moving away from low-skilled jobs in feminized work sectors to higher-skilled jobs.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

1.2.1 Research Aims

Throughout the study, my research aims to elevate Laotian migrant women's unique position by raising awareness at the intra-national level (i.e. Thailand and Laos). It aims to propel Laotian women's social and cultural potential beyond themselves and into the larger political context of strengthening Thai-Lao state relations and increasing labour protection of Laotian migrant women and migrant women in Thailand as a whole. Using Laotian migrant women as my main case study, my research hopes to contribute to the new notion of Laotian migrant women working in Thailand that they have a unique position in Thailand not just as migrant workers, which is eased by the language and cultural proximities between Laos and Thailand.

Using Laotian migrant women as a case study, I aim to create policy recommendations to effect useful labour migration policy changes for all migrant women in Thailand, such as increasing labour protection of migrant women. The study also aims to produce critical knowledge to effect useful policy changes with

feasible policy solutions to improve Laotian women's social and cultural capital in Thai society.

My research aims to explicate Laotian women's potential in gaining social mobility and cultural assimilation into Thai society, through their gender empowerment levels and further cross-border mobility. It also aims to produce critical knowledge and contribute to literature on Laotian women as a microcosm of Thai-Lao state relations, and explicate the implications of cross-border labour migration at the intra-national level. Focusing on Laotian women working in Thailand provides a gendered and cultural lens to the labour migratory flows between Indochina and Thailand, which has not been explored much in the literature.

1.2.2 Research Objectives

My research objectives are:

- i) To examine the feminization process in the cross-border mobility of Laotian migrant women;
- ii) To investigate the aspects of vulnerability of Laotian migrant women vis-à-vis the feminization process; and
- iii) To examine the stages of Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment and the role of stakeholders on gender empowerment.

1.3 Research Questions

My research questions are:

1. To what extent does the feminization process affect Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility?
2. What are the consequences of the feminization process and the COVID-19 pandemic on Laotian migrant women's vulnerability?
3. Using gender indicators, what is the role of stakeholders on Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment?

1.4 Research Hypothesis

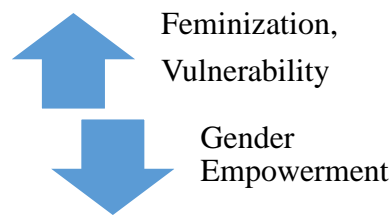


Figure 1: Research Hypothesis

My hypothesis is the relationship of the concept of feminization on two variables, vulnerability and gender empowerment, as seen in Figure 1. I hypothesize that the more protracted the feminization process that Laotian migrant women go through in their cross-border mobility, they become more vulnerable and less empowered as women.

Hence, I posit that gender empowerment is necessary to reduce the vulnerability of Laotian migrant women in their cross-border mobility and mitigate the negative impacts and conditions of the feminization process. Empowering Laotian migrant women in the economic, legal, and social aspects could improve their further cross-border mobility. This would enable Laotian migrant women to reduce their vulnerability in feminized work sectors by earning better equal wages with their male counterparts, have improved labour protection and rights, and jobs with higher skills. This would also improve Laotian migrant women's personal choice and development in their work and life.

1.5. Research Significance

The significance of my research lies in the contribution of the dearth of literature surrounding Laotian migrant women in feminized and informal work sectors, namely in agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory. With my research, I seek to demonstrate how Laotian migrant women could contribute to the larger context of Thailand's increasing dependence on Indochina's labour migration for the Thai economy, especially in light of an increasingly aged population in Thailand.

More pertinently, the research is significant in demonstrating the cultural and linguistic proximity between Laos and Thailand at the personal level, through first-

hand narratives of Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand. The cultural and linguistic nuances will be explored through narratives of their livelihoods and lifestyles. The cultural and linguistic nuances explored through the Laotian migrant women's narratives of their livelihoods and lifestyles will further aid in better understanding their further cross-border mobility in Thailand.

In addition, limited research has been done on Laotian migrant women who come to work in Thailand, as research is usually done on migrant women from Myanmar and Cambodia, such as in the agricultural industry (Mekong Migration Network [MMN], 2020). There is also limited research that looks into the following challenges that Laotian migrant women face when working in Thailand. Hence, my research seeks to fill this particular academic gap.

1.6 Research Methodology

In this section, I explain my research methodology which includes an overview of my research methodology, elaboration of my data collection methods and processes, as well as research limitations. In addition, I discuss my research limitations, the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to my overall research methodology, specifically the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on my primary data collection methods and process. I also discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to my research limitations.

1.6.1 Methodology Matrix

Table 1 shows my methodology matrix which encapsulates the entire data collection approach and process that I undertook for this research. More specifically, I categorized the types of data and information sources that I needed to address each of my research objectives and research questions, together with an identification of a list of the types of interviewees I needed for my primary data collection and the methods of data collection for each type of data and information sources.

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Data Needed & Information Sources	List of Interviewees	Methods of Data

				Collection
To examine the feminization process in the cross-border mobility of Laotian migrant women	To what extent does the feminization process affect Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility?	<p><u>Secondary Data</u></p> <p>Academic articles on Laotian migrant workers</p> <p>Academic theories on feminization of migration, rural-urban migration, cross-border mobility</p> <p>Organizational reports on Laotian migrant women</p> <p>News and articles on COVID-19 situation and impact on migration</p> <p><u>Primary Data</u></p> <p>Interviews with Laotian migrant women, employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts, civil society and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives</p>	<p>Laotian migrant women in agriculture, services, domestic work, and garment factory</p> <p>Employers</p> <p>Migrant network leaders</p> <p>Academics and</p>	<p>Documentary research</p> <p>Structured/semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, ethnography</p>

			experts Civil society and NGOs	
To investigate the aspects of vulnerability of Laotian migrant women vis-à-vis the feminization process	What are the consequences of the feminization process and the COVID-19 pandemic on Laotian migrant women's vulnerability?	<u>Secondary Data</u> Academic articles on Laotian migrant workers Academic theories on feminization of migration, rural-urban migration, cross-border mobility, vulnerability Organizational reports on Laotian migrant women News and articles on COVID-19 situation and impact on migration <u>Primary Data</u> Interviews with Laotian migrant women, employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts, civil society and NGO representatives	Laotian migrant women in agriculture, services, domestic work, and garment factory Employers	Document ary research Structured/ semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions

			<p>Migrant network leaders</p> <p>Academics and experts</p> <p>Civil society and NGOs</p>	, ethnography
<p>To examine the stages of Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment and the role of stakeholders on gender empowerment</p>	<p>Using gender indicators¹, what is the role of stakeholders on Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment?</p>	<p><u>Secondary Data</u></p> <p>Academic articles on Laotian migrant workers</p> <p>Academic theories on gender empowerment, livelihood pathways, cross-border mobility</p> <p>Organizational reports on Laotian migrant women</p> <p>News and articles on COVID-19 situation and impact on migration</p> <p><u>Primary Data</u></p> <p>Interviews with Laotian migrant women, employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts, civil society and NGO representatives</p>	<p>Laotian migrant women in agriculture, services, domestic</p>	<p>Documentary research</p> <p>Structured/semi-structured qualitative interviews,</p>

¹ The gender indicators are: access, self-awareness, mobilization, and control.

			work, and garment factory Employers Migrant network leaders Academics and experts Civil society and NGOs	participant observation, focus group discussions
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Table 1: Methodology Matrix

1.6.2 Data Collection Methods during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic situation had a significant impact on my data collection methods, mainly for my primary data collection. I originally planned to start my primary data collection between March 2020 and April 2020. However, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened from January 2020 to March 2020. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Thai government issued a lockdown and closed both domestic and international borders in a bid to control the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that travelling to places within Thailand was not possible at all during the course of my planned data collection period, as it also coincided with the timeline of the travel ban and restrictions at the national and international level. Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic delay the planned timeline of my primary data collection, the lockdown of the national and international borders of Thailand indefinitely and according to the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I had to rethink the methods of my primary data collection. This resulted in a delay of my primary data collection due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

As shown in the methodology matrix table above, the methods of primary data collection were considered in advance and before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic situation on my primary data collection method meant that I had limited choice in conducting my research. Hence, I

had to act quickly and change my original plan of collecting my primary data in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic situation which was changing fast every day. I could not travel to different provinces in Thailand to meet and interview different types of interviewees as planned, due to the ongoing travel bans at the national and international level. I also considered my own personal safety in making changes to my plan of collecting primary data as the COVID-19 pandemic situation was unprecedented with a rising number of death cases every day.

In Table 2, I summarize the slight variations for the primary data and secondary data collection methods done before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Data Needed & Information Sources	Data Collection Method before COVID-19	Data Collection Method during COVID-19
<p><u>Primary Data</u></p> <p>Interviews with Laotian migrant women in the following work sectors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 women in agriculture: Bua, Pan, Dok, Foy ▪ 4 women in services: Mai, Din, Rak, Ton ▪ 2 women in domestic work: Bee, Gek ▪ 1 woman in garment factory: Faa 	<p>Conduct face-to-face structured and semi-structured qualitative interviews</p>	<p>Conduct structured qualitative interviews online (e.g. Facebook messenger call, Line call) or on the phone</p>
	<p>Observe Laotian migrant women in person and apply ethnographic methods</p>	<p>Use preliminary data that I gathered of some groups of Laotian migrant women prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to analyze as data for participant observation and ethnographic methods</p>
<p><u>Primary Data</u></p> <p>Interviews with employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts, civil society and NGOs</p>	<p>Conduct face-to-face structured and semi-structured qualitative interviews</p>	<p>Conduct structured qualitative interviews online (e.g. Facebook messenger call, Line call) or on the phone</p>
	<p>Conduct focus group discussions in person</p>	<p>Conduct small group, semi-structured qualitative interviews online (e.g. Skype group call, Zoom group call)</p>

<p><u>Secondary Data</u></p> <p>Academic articles on Laotian migrant workers</p> <p>Academic theories on gender empowerment, livelihood pathways, cross-border mobility</p> <p>Organizational reports on Laotian migrant women</p> <p>News and articles on COVID-19 situation and impact on migration</p>	<p>Documentary research</p>	<p>Conduct more documentary research as supplementary information to make up for the limitations in doing primary data collection due to the COVID-19 pandemic</p>
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Table 2: Revised Data Collection Methods

Hence, my primary data collection mainly focused on using qualitative research design, while my secondary data collection focused on documentary research that is based online.

Through the combination of secondary data collection and primary data collection, I aim to elicit the contextual information and rationale of Laotian migrant women who has travelled from Laos to work in Thailand, their motivations and lived experiences working in Thailand, as well as their plans for the future. I seek to gain a variety of perspectives on Laotian migrant women based on the different groups of key informants. I seek to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the core labour and work issues that Laotian migrant women faced from my key informants. Having an external perspective of the issues that Laotian migrant women faced would be helpful in having a more holistic understanding of the circumstances and experiences of Laotian migrant women working and living in Thailand. This is so that I could empathize with them and better understand the lives of these Laotian migrant women. I seek to explicate Laotian migrant women's work histories, livelihoods, and experiences living and working in Thailand, as well as their plans for the future.

1.6.3 Data Collection Process during COVID-19

I further elaborate on my data collection process for both secondary data collection and primary data collection, based on my revised data collection methods as shown in the table above.

Primary Data Collection

For my primary data collection, I have two groups of respondents:

- I. main cases of Laotian migrant women; and
- II. supplementary cases of key informants, namely employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts, civil society and NGOs.

First, I elaborate on my primary data collection process for my main cases of Laotian migrant women. I did structured, qualitative interviews individually with 11 Laotian migrant women in Thai language. This was done mainly through phone calls and occasionally with the help of technology and social media such as Facebook and Line calls. As I was facing the height of the COVID-19 pandemic with national and international travel bans on top of strict individual movement restrictions during my data collection period, I had to conduct qualitative interviews with Laotian migrant women remotely. This meant that I did not meet majority of my main cases in person before. However, for some of my main respondents, I managed to meet them in person before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred for preliminary data collection which I will elaborate later. For some of my main cases whom I met in person before, it was easier to get their consensus to be interviewed, as I sustained communication and built relationships with them for a couple of months since the first time that I met them in person. For the rest of my main cases, I found them with the help of my professors and many individuals whom I met before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. They then referred and recommended Laotian migrant women to me from their personal and professional networks. I then contacted potential main cases through social media first to chat with them for a few times before approaching them for phone call interviews. This process of searching for main cases and getting their consensus for me to interview them started between April 2020 and May 2020. Nevertheless, I managed to start interviewing remotely in May 2020 with a few main cases. Eventually, I managed to interview 11 Laotian migrant women remotely using

random sampling method as they were recommended and referred by many different individuals, which also meant that the 11 Laotian migrant women worked in diverse work sectors, namely agricultural work, services work, domestic work, and garment factory work.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, I met some groups of Laotian migrant women in person at Mukdahan and in Bangkok city for preliminary data collection and to gain better understanding of my main cases of Laotian migrant women. I stayed for a few days with the Laotian migrant women doing agricultural work in their employer's place in Mukdahan province in Thailand. In addition, I met Laotian migrant women doing services work at their workplace in Bangkok city. I planned to meet these two groups again for a few times so that I could collect sufficient information and data to analyze using ethnography and participation observation methods. However, as a result of the heightening of the COVID-19 pandemic situation from March 2020, I could not continue my plans of meeting up with them again. Although I could not fully deploy the use of participant observation with simple ethnographic methods on my main respondents, I could use the preliminary data and information that I have gathered from meeting up with these groups of Laotian migrant women in Mukdahan province and Bangkok city respectively as hindsight data for analyzing using participation observation and ethnographic methods. The preliminary data analysis will be further elaborated in Chapters 3 and 4.

Next, I elaborate on my primary data collection process for my supplementary cases of key informants, which include employers, migrant network leaders, representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, as well as academics and experts knowledgeable in the field of migration. I did structured, qualitative phone call interviews individually with majority of my supplementary cases as well as semi-structured, qualitative phone call interviews in small groups with some of my supplementary cases. I interviewed 13 supplementary cases of key informants in total. The qualitative interviews were done either in English language or in Thai language, which depended on the language ability of my key informants. For the structured qualitative individual phone call interviews, it was done mainly with the help of social media apps such as Facebook and Line calls. For the semi-

structured qualitative phone call interviews done in small groups, it was done with the help of technology such as using Skype for business group calls and Zoom group calls. Similarly, due to the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to conduct qualitative interviews with supplementary cases remotely. I found potential supplementary cases with the help of my professors' personal and professional networks, based on multiple levels of recommendations and referrals. Similar to my approach for main cases, I contacted the potential supplementary cases directly on social media such as Line and Facebook first before approaching them for phone call interviews. This process of searching for potential supplementary cases to be interviewed in May 2020, which meant that I searched for potential supplementary cases in the same timeframe as my search for potential main cases. This process of searching for potential supplementary cases was easier for me, as I had sustained communication and established relationship with some of my key informants when I met them in person before prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, some of my supplementary cases knew my professors personally, and the relationship and networks helped me a lot.

Similar to the approach as my main cases, I had to conduct interviews remotely for my supplementary cases due to the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic situation. I started interviewing my supplementary cases remotely in the same timeframe as I interviewed my main cases in May 2020. I managed to interview more number of supplementary cases as compared to my main cases in the same timeframe. I was able to reach out far and wide to supplementary cases residing in different provinces in Thailand, such as Nongkhai and Ubon Ratchathani. My supplementary cases included academics and experts from Ubon Ratchathani University and Institute of Asian Studies in Chulalongkorn University, as well as representatives from NGOs and civil society such as Homenet and The Fellowship Foundation for Child and Youth Development in Nongkhai province in Thailand.

From my primary data collection, I will link the thematic findings to address my research objectives and research questions on feminization, vulnerability, and women's empowerment. In Chapter 3, I will present my main cases of Laotian migrant women and supplementary cases of key informants, namely employers, migrant network leaders, academics, experts, and representatives from NGOs, civil

society, and international organizations. I summarize additional information that I got from my supplementary cases which are different from research findings of my main cases. I discuss the common themes that arose from my supplementary case study, using thematic analysis and content analysis. Finally, I link the thematic findings to address my research objectives and research questions on feminization, vulnerability, and women's empowerment. As my primary data collection focuses on qualitative research design, I will focus on the narratives of my main cases, including the interesting and different insights from my supplementary cases.

Secondary Data Collection

For my secondary data collection, I collected two types of information:

- I. academic-based articles; and
- II. evidence-based articles and news.

For academic-based articles, I did documentary research online and sourced for academic articles that were related to my main theoretical framework and literature review, namely on rural-urban migration, feminization of migration, vulnerability, livelihood pathways, gender empowerment, and cross-border mobility. This was to add to the theorization of my main concepts for this research and to further elaborate the relationship between the main concepts of feminization of migration, vulnerability, and gender empowerment.

For the evidence-based articles and news, I sourced for relevant non-governmental organizational (NGO) reports related to Laotian migrant workers and NGOs that were mainly based in Thailand, such as International Organization for Migration (IOM), ILO, MMN, and the United Nations (UN). The documentary research on practical reports on Laotian migrant workers from NGO perspective is used to supplement and complement theoretical information from the academic articles. I also sourced for real-time news and articles that described the COVID-19 pandemic situation and how it had consequences on the migrant workers whom were working in Thailand. This is done in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic situation and its implications on migrant workers in Thailand. Most of the migrant workers from Thailand's neighbouring countries, namely Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some migrant workers had to leave Thailand,

while some became stranded in Thailand as the international borders closed and they could not leave Thailand. The news and articles on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also used to compare against the information garnered from my primary data collection, so that I could cross-check and confirm different information sources regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my main case study of Laotian migrant women.

In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, my secondary data collection was not affected as the method of collecting secondary data remained the same, which was done online. There were no problems or issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to my primary data collection process. The only modifications I made to my secondary data collection were that I conducted more documentary research as supplementary information to make up for the limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on my primary data collection.

1.6.4 Ethical Issues

I addressed potential ethical issues resulting from my research in the following ways:

- I protected the identity of my main and supplementary cases through anonymity and change of names of people and places;
- I protected the personal information gathered during qualitative interviews of my main and supplementary cases through informed human consent (oral) using phone calls and/or video calls;
- I ensured data confidentiality from data or information garnered from my main and supplementary cases interviews through informed human consent (oral) using phone calls and/or video calls; and
- I was sensitive and aware towards the circumstances of my main cases of Laotian migrant women especially in the time of global pandemic (i.e. COVID-19) when interviewing them.

The ethical issues as mentioned above are taken into consideration together with the current COVID-19 situation at the time of conducting my research.

1.6.5 Research Limitations

I categorize and discuss my research limitations that I faced in conducting my research according to two types of limitations: i) internal limitations which are mainly attributed to my limited personal skills and abilities, and ii) external limitations which are mainly attributed by the nature of my research topic and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Language

The main internal limitation that I faced when conducting my primary data collection was language limitation. Before I conducted the interviews in Thai with my main cases of Laotian migrant women, I was aware of these multiple layers of limitations in terms of language. In terms of language, I am aware that I will have a language gap and difficulty in fully understanding my main cases even before conducting the interviews. This is because my main cases' native language is Laotian language. For me, the language that I know quite well that is closest to Laotian language is the Thai language. Although I am fairly fluent in speaking Thai, I acknowledged that perhaps I could not grasp all the nuances of the Thai language throughout the interviews. However, although my main cases and I could meet in the middle by conversing in Thai language for the interviews, am still aware that there will still be a language limitation in fully understanding my main cases, especially in terms of nuances in speech. This would also serve as a barrier in fully understanding the situation that my main cases faced. Hence, I may not fully understand my main and supplementary cases whose English language abilities are not as good and they rely mainly on their Thai language abilities.

In addition, I realized that I had another layer to my language limitation after talking to my main cases for a few times on social media before I approached them for interviews. I realized that my main cases had different levels of language abilities in the Thai language. For instance, some of them were able to listen and speak in Thai but were unable to read and write in Thai, while some of them were able to listen and speak in Thai but were able to read and write in basic Thai. I realized that this is because Thai language is not their first language and Laotian language is still their native language. In addition, they feel most comfortable conversing in Laos than in Thai. All of them learnt Thai language informally on their own based on their

formative understanding of their native language (i.e. Laos), due to the similarities of Thai and Laotian language. However, there were still some differences in terms of language nuances between Thai and Laotian language. The language gap difficulty is thus compounded as I had to take into consideration my main respondents' differences in their Thai language skills when thinking on the methodological approach for conducting the interviews. I acknowledged the language gap due to my limitations in my level and ability of Thai language, as well as some of my main respondents' level and ability of Thai language. This made my language limitation more complex, as I needed to find a solution to address both my language limitation as well as my main cases' differences in Thai language skills. I tried several combinations of methods to mitigate these multiple layers of limitations in terms of language.

I took the language limitation seriously into consideration when I thought of how to approach conducting my interviews with my main cases. First, I decided that the interviews would all be conducted verbally, as all of my main cases could speak and listen to Thai. Next, I translated the interview questions from English to Thai. I ensured that my translated questions were simple and straightforward in a conversational manner, so that my questions could be easily understood by my main cases. After I translated the questions from English to Thai, I cross-checked my translated questions with a Thai and English native speaker to ensure that my translations from English to Thai were accurate. I ensured that this step was done before I conducted interviews with my main cases in Thai, as this step was meant to resolve any possible mistranslation due to my language limitation and also to align the nuances and meaning in my questions in English to Thai.

Next, I grouped my main cases according to my judgement of their Thai language abilities after communicating with them for a few times on social media. I then modified the way that I interviewed my main cases according to their level and ability of speaking and listening Thai. For the group of cases that was fluent in speaking and listening Thai, I interviewed them myself using the translated questions that were cross-checked and confirmed by the same Thai and English native speaker. For the group of cases that were not fluent in speaking and listening Thai, I interviewed them simultaneously with the presence of a Thai and Laos native speaker,

whom then helped me translate my questions verbally from Thai to Laos in a two-way conversational format. This method of simultaneous translation between Thai and Laotian language for the interview was indeed a more complicated way of interviewing and to lessen the language limitations. After conducting the interviews using these two methods, I then cross-checked information from the interviews with the same Thai and English native speaker, with my interview recordings. This was to align my understanding and interpretation of Thai language was accurate and to resolve any possible mistranslation due to my language limitation. I also cross-checked my transcribed interview data with the same Thai and English native speaker to ensure that I understood the language nuances accurately while translating from Thai to English.

The language limitation did not stop at my main cases. I also faced some degree of language limitations for some of my supplementary cases. The language limitation was that some of them were native Thai speakers but they could not converse and speak in English. This meant that for some of my supplementary cases, I had to interview them in Thai language. However, I acknowledged that my Thai language skills cannot be compared to a native Thai speaker, which meant that I faced another language limitation. I also took the language limitation seriously into consideration for this group of supplementary cases that could only speak and listen in Thai. I translated the interview questions from English to Thai in a conversational manner but in a more sophisticated manner than my way of translating questions for my main respondents, as I took into account the background and profile of my supplementary cases. Similarly, I cross-checked my translated questions with a Thai and English native speaker to ensure that my translations from English to Thai were accurate. I ensured that this step was done before I conducted interviews with this group of supplementary cases in Thai, as this step was meant to resolve any possible mistranslation due to my language limitation and also to align the nuances and meaning in my questions in English to Thai. Next, I interviewed them myself using the translated questions that were cross-checked and confirmed by the same Thai and English native speaker. After conducting the interviews in Thai with this group of supplementary cases, I then cross-checked my transcribed interview data with the same Thai and English native speaker, with my interview recordings. This was to

align my understanding and interpretation of Thai language was accurate and to resolve any possible mistranslation due to my language limitation.

Political Context of Laos

An external research limitation that I faced throughout the course of my research is directly related to my research topic. My research focuses on Laotian migrant women living and working in different parts of Thailand, hence my research topic has a specific focus on the Laos context of migrant workers. There is the difficulty in gaining access to networks of Laotian migrant women and organizations based in Laos due to the political sensitivity of gathering information in Laos, as Laos is governed by a socialist system. This provides a form of limitation for me due to the political context of Laos as a socialist country. I face research limitations in conducting research within Laos. This is also attributed to the political sensitivity of conducting research in Laos, due to the nature of Laos as a socialist country. This research limitation is thus an external limitation attributed by the nature of my study on the Laos context. This research limitation is also commonly faced by other researchers whose research topics are also related to Laos.

The difficulty in conducting research in Laos is mainly attributed to the political sensitivity of Laos as a socialist country and the low level of trust that the Laotian government have towards researchers in general. Researchers are often turned down and unwelcomed in Laos, unless researchers obtain an official permit from the Lao government. However, an added problem is the lengthy and bureaucratic process of applying for the official permit from the Laotian government, in addition to being subjected to multiple and lengthy checks by Lao government officials. The lengthy and bureaucratic process of applying for the official permit to conduct research from the Laotian government would likely be in conflict with research deadlines, especially for my case. Technically, I have only a few months to finish conducting my research due to my one-year master degree programme that includes both research and coursework. Hence, I have a very short timeframe of conducting my research, which makes it impossible for me to afford to wait for an official permit from the Laotian government in order to conduct research in Laos.

The solution to this form of external research limitation is to limit my research

to be conducted within Thailand only. This meant that I had to locate my main cases living and working in Thailand, as well as limit my search of supplementary cases to individuals whom were residing and working in Thailand, as well as organizations based in Thailand. Although this solution resolves part of this external research limitation by providing me with an alternative way to conduct my research and still being able to focus my research on the Laos context, I acknowledge that this solution does not fully resolve the external research limitation. This is because my alternative way of conducting research still renders me being unable to gain research insights and perspectives from Laotian government officials, as well as civil society and NGOs based in Laos.

Physical and Travel Limitations

Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, I experienced physical and travel limitations. In a bid to prevent further spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Thai government issued travel bans with a national and international border lockdown in March 2020, and also enforced restrictions to individual movement by closing down retail shops and businesses. Hence, I could not proceed with my original plans of travelling to different provinces in Thailand for my primary data collection in April 2020. I was restricted physically, as I could not take domestic flights to Mukdahan or even travel within Bangkok city. This implication caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic provided much uncertainty to my research methodology and data collection as the travel bans were issued indefinitely and according to the COVID-19 pandemic situation at the point of time, which was also ever-changing by the day.

Delayed Data Collection

The COVID-19 global pandemic was not looking optimistic between March 2020 and April 2020, and it was the same timeframe for doing my primary data collection. In addition, the travel bans and restricted individual movements were enforced indefinitely in the same timeframe that I needed to start my primary data collection. This also meant that it was not possible for me to proceed with my original plan of conducting face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with my main and supplementary cases for my primary data collection. Hence, I had to tweak my

research methodology and primary data collection methods to suit the enforcements on travel bans and individual movements at that point in time.

I took additional time to tweak my research methodology and primary data collection methods as the physical and travel limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic situation were very limiting in itself. In addition to the physical and travel limitations, I had to take into consideration how to reach out to my main cases, whom are migrant workers. Amending my research methodology and primary data collection due to the implications of the COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in 1 month's delay in starting my primary data collection.

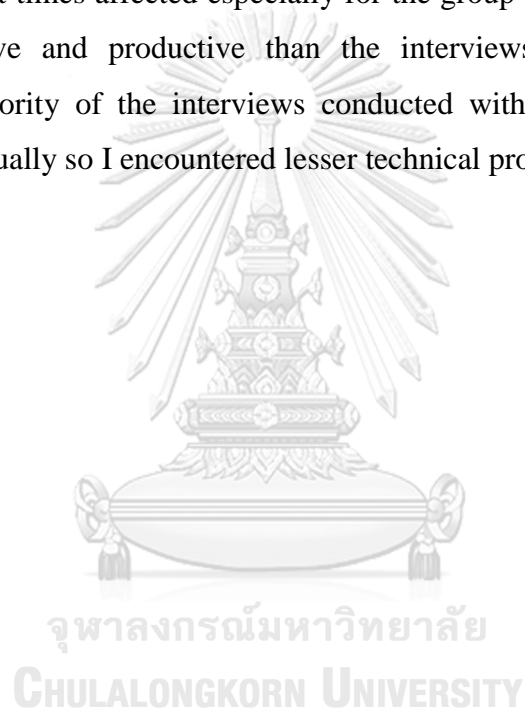
Accessibility to Main Respondents

Although I amended my primary data collection method and aligned it to the enforcement of travel bans and restricted individual movements, I faced several challenges in terms of accessibility to my main cases of Laotian migrant women. This was mainly due to their profile as foreign migrant workers in Thailand, which made this group harder to locate and access to in addition to travel bans and restricted individual movements in Thailand. In addition to the difficulty in accessing my main cases, I also faced challenges in having them consenting to my interview requests. Hence, I faced a couple of rejections from potential main cases. This might be due to their lack of trust in me as they had never met me in person before, and with the travel bans and restricted individual movements in Thailand, I was also unable to meet them in person. Some potential main cases were also too busy with their work schedules and did not have any free time in between work to be interviewed, while other potential main cases were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and hence were not mentally or emotionally ready to be interviewed.

The difficulty in accessing to my main cases also meant that I was unable to control the profile of my main cases and the sector that they are working at in Thailand. I also had to rely on various individuals' networks and relationships in gaining access to my main cases. However, this limitation in accessibility of my main cases had favourable outcomes as the group of main cases that I managed to access is random and varied, which is good in terms of analysis of data findings.

Technical Limitations

I faced technical limitations which were related to my revised approach to research methodology and primary data collection method, which was to be done remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic further limited the way of communication with my main and supplementary cases, which was mainly limited to collecting my primary data through phone call interviews. Hence, the difficulty and challenge was more of the technical aspects of conducting the interviews online or on social media. For instance, the quality of the voice call on the social media platforms such as Skype and Zoom, were at times affected especially for the group calls. This made the group calls less effective and productive than the interviews conducted individually. Nevertheless, majority of the interviews conducted with my supplementary cases were done individually so I encountered lesser technical problems in total.



CHAPTER TWO – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I examine the core academic concepts that frame my research topic through in-depth literature review of the concepts, namely on cross-border mobility, feminization of transnational migration, vulnerability, and gender empowerment. I also show how these academic concepts relate to one another in a conceptual framework.

2.1 Cross-Border Mobility

I use the term cross-border mobility to contextualize the large-scale phenomenon of Laotian migrant women who cross the borders from Laos to Thailand mainly for work. United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019) summarizes the history of large-scale, cross-border mobility to Thailand from its neighbouring countries, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), that began since the 1990s. United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019:131) reported that “Thailand is estimated to have approximately 3.9 million migrant workers from CLMV countries. Collectively, these migrant workers send USD 2.8 billion in formal or regulated remittances per annum to their countries of origin.” Hence, cross-border mobility can be conceived of as massive numbers of individuals moving from their countries of origin which is near the borders of Thailand into Thailand mainly for better economic opportunities. This has significant economic implications for both the receiving country and the participating country, which is illustrated by the significant volume of remittances by United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019).

IOM (2011) also identified other factors for cross-border mobility from CLMV countries to Thailand, such as the lack of employment and educational opportunities in rural areas, segmentation of the labour market in urban areas, widening income gaps between Thailand and its neighbouring countries, slowing growth of Thailand’s workforce, improvements in roads and infrastructure linking the

Mekong sub-region, and strong demand for low-skilled workers in labour-intensive production.

2.1.1 Rural-Urban Migration

The term cross-border mobility can be better understood in contextualizing it within the migratory pathway of rural to urban migration, for instance Laotian migrant women migrating from rural areas of Laos to urban areas of Thailand.

It is important to understand why Laotian migrant women would migrate out of Laos in the first place. According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2020), Laos is a land linked country bordering Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. About 6.5 million people live in its 18 provinces, with 68% of its people still living in rural areas. This suggests that the geography and demography of Laos is limited to the agricultural industry and there are limitations for other industries to grow in Laos.

The primary reason why Laotian migrant women find themselves more limited in job opportunities as compared to Laotian migrant men is because of the limitation of jobs to the agricultural industry in Laos, which would demand more male labour as compared to female labour. The demand of agricultural work requires more male labour as the nature of the agricultural work is more physically intensive. This leaves Laotian migrant women with limited choices in jobs, especially when they are poorly educated or uneducated.

Due to the geography and demography of Laos, the agricultural-centered economy, the small population and limited job markets in Laos necessitate Laotian migrant women to migrate out of Laos to Thailand. This is thus an important push factor in why Laotian migrant women want to come to Thailand for work, which necessitates Laotian migrant women to leave Laos in search of other employment opportunities, such as in Thailand. Poverty is another reason that pushes Laotian migrant women to migrate. Aida (2006) added that one explanation on the high mobility among females is the higher illiteracy rate and lower education among women, in addition to the current scarce job market in Laos that is not able to provide work for them.

Some Laotian migrant women crossed the border to work near the border provinces, such as Mukdahan province, whereas other Laotian migrant women travelled further to the city center, Bangkok. The migratory pathway of rural to urban migration exemplifies the degree of socio-economic changes in Laos and the patterns of migration that follow the socio-economic changes, as examined by Phouxay (2010). According to Phouxay (2010:14), “migration in Laos is influenced by a variety of factors, including the economic growth in urban sectors and the transformation of social and economic conditions in the rural areas. One outcome of this process is the regional diversification of the economy, including increasing regional income differentials”. Hence, the transformation of the Laos economy kick starts the process of migration from rural areas to more urban areas, including international migration to Thailand.

2.1.2 Mobility

I expand on the term mobility to better understand cross-border mobility in three aspects: economic mobility, social mobility, and cultural mobility. The term mobility is important to further analyze Laotian migrant women’s present and future circumstances when they cross borders from Laos to Thailand.

Economic Mobility

Economic theories of migration, such as the micro neoclassical theory of migration, the new economics of migration and world systems theory, are important theories in understanding economic mobility, particularly why Laotian migrant women choose to seek employment opportunities outside their home country such as in Thailand.

First, the micro neoclassical theory of migration emphasizes the individual’s decision according to the logical outflow of labour migration based on higher wage differentials in a higher-income generating country. According to Borjas (1990), potential migrants estimate the costs and benefits of moving to alternative international locations and migrate to the locations where net returns are greatest over time for themselves. Second, the new economics of migration, according to Bloom and Stark (1985), talk about migration decisions that are not made by individual, but

families or households that influence the individual's decision to migrate to maximize income and minimize risk and constraints in the market. Last, the world systems theory, according to Wallerstein (1974), the penetration of capitalist economic relations into peripheral, noncapitalist societies creates a mobile population that is prone to migrate abroad, driven by a desire for higher profits and greater wealth and entering poorer countries on the periphery of the world economy in search of land, raw materials, and labour.

These economic theories of migration show the underlying motivations behind why Laotian women migrate from Laos to Thailand. An important factor is the distinct wage differentials. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)/ILO (2017:47) stated that “the income disparity between Thailand and neighbouring countries continues to be an important explanatory factor of migration flows today...For example, average monthly wages in Lao PDR were USD 119 in 2012, compared to USD 357 in Thailand.” In addition, ILO (2019) reported that “Thailand is the largest destination country for Lao migrants, primarily driven by wage differentials – the current monthly minimum wage in Lao is Lao Kip (LAK) 900,000 (around US\$110) and the Thai minimum is more than double this amount”. Hence, the wages that Laotian migrant women earn while working in Thailand are approximately two to three times more than what they would earn back in Laos, which attracts Laotian migrant women to continue coming to Thailand to work.

As an overview, there is a demand for cheap low-skilled and or unskilled migrant labour for Thailand's economy with an ageing population. The tangible aspect of large-scale labour migration from Laos to Thailand could be seen based on the sheer size and volume of remittances of Lao migrants working in Thailand. For instance, United Nations Action for Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons (2015:2) stated that “In 2010, it was estimated that Lao migrants from around the world sent back to their country (US) \$7,000,000, equivalent of 0.1 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.” These reports suggest the significant flows of migrant labour from Laos into Thailand, and how this is mainly driven by economic reasons that are of win-win situation for both Laos and Thailand. Aida (2006) also acknowledged that labour migration of Laotian women has been increasing in recent years, due to few job opportunities within the country as well as materialistic

attractiveness in Thailand, where the impact of migration is substantial, not only for Laos' economy, but also at the household level.

Social Mobility

The notion of social capital in the form of Laotian migrant women's social networks and network theory are important in understanding the social mobility of Laotian migrant women in their decisions to move abroad from Laos to Thailand. First, on social capital theory, I refer to Putnam (2000) who posits that social networks contain value for individuals and social contacts influence the productivity of individuals and groups, so that social capital inheres in relations among individuals. Putnam (2001)'s concept of social capital includes trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity. This can be related back to Laotian migrant women's motivation to cross borders from Laos to Thailand in terms of social capital. They seek trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity in migrant social networks.

According to Massey et.al (1993:448), migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin. They increase the likelihood of international movement because they lower the costs and risks of movement and increase the expected net returns to migration. Network connections constitute a form of social capital that people can draw upon to gain access to foreign employment." Not only does this reinforce the new economics of migration, this also suggests the important role of social relationships that perpetuate the flows and patterns of international migration, such as from Laos to Thailand. Social mobility also refers to the amount of social relations and ties that the migrant has and the capability of social mobility to increase over time as migrants build their own social capital when living and working in the place of destination.

In relating back to Laotian migrant women, this also suggests the potential of Laotian migrant women to expand their social networks through working and living in Thailand, which may contribute to their further mobility, such as moving from Thailand to another country in Southeast Asia, for instance.

Cultural Mobility

The rationale that Laotian migrant workers are chosen in favour by the Thai employers, as compared to Burmese migrant workers or Cambodian migrant workers, could be very much due to the cultural and linguistic proximity between Laos and Thailand. This is an important pull factor attracting Laotian migrant workers, including Laotian migrant women, to come and work in Thailand. In addition, the cultural and linguistic proximity between Laos and Thailand makes it difficult to distinguish between Laotian and Thai migrant workers. This makes it even easier for Laotian migrant women to cross borders to work in Thailand for many years and even attempt to integrate into Thai society after living many years in Thailand.

Aida (2006) emphasized the cultural and linguistic proximity between Thailand and Laos too. Aida (2006) reported that in 2002, approximately 36,286 Lao migrants arrived in the province and 2,742 migrants were deported. The data documented 690 registered workers in Mukdahan in 2002: factory workers (406 people), domestic helpers (173 people), general labors (75 people), agriculture workers (35 people), and livestock workers (12 people). Aida (2006) further reported that the majority of workers who move to work in Thailand from Laos are found to be female, and most of them are from Vientiane, Borikhamxai, Khammouan and Savannakhet provinces. Their previous job before migrating to Thailand is usually agriculture-related. Their work in Thailand is classified as either seasonal or non-seasonal. After returning to Laos, some of them started businesses by using the skills they gained from working in Thailand.

In addition, in the context of an increasingly ageing population in Thailand, female labour will be in more demand as more caregiving services is needed to care for the elderly. United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (2019:15) reported that with “the ageing work force and declining birth rate in Thailand, coupled with a reluctance among Thai workers to take jobs within low-skilled sectors, it is likely that several segments of Thailand’s economy will continue to be highly dependent on low- and semi-skilled migrant workers from CLMV countries.” Hence, with Laos having close proximity in terms of culture and language to Thailand, Laotian migrant women will therefore increasingly find it easier to work in informal work sectors in Thailand, especially domestic work and caregiving work

due to the ageing population in Thailand. However, this in itself becomes problematic as Laotian migrant women face challenges and difficulties that come along with working in these informal work sectors, which will be elaborated later.

2.2 Feminization of Transnational Migration

I refer to the term feminization of transnational migration to explicate the large-scale phenomenon of Laotian migrant women crossing the borders from Laos to Thailand. Sassen (2000) elaborated the feminization of transnational migration by discussing the consequence and impact transnational migration has on women in the form of women's burden and the feminization of survival that women need to go through. Sassen (2000) emphasized the importance of circuits and the dependence on women for these economic circuits. According to Sassen (2000:503), there is "a growing presence of women in a variety of cross-border circuits that have become a source of livelihood, profit-making and the accrual of foreign currency."

Yeoh (2016:77) explains the feminization of transnational migration in the context of Southeast Asia, where "Southeast Asia is experiencing a feminization of migration flows as a result of changing production and reproduction processes worldwide. Women in the region are on the move – often across transnational space – in response to increasing demand from at least two fronts: export processing zones and industrial parks that depend on cheap and flexible labor with severely diminished rights; and globalizing cities and more developed regions with increasing care deficits (in terms of childcare, elder care and care for the sick), which are addressed by importing care and domestic workers." This suggests that there is an increasing demand for female workers at low costs in feminized sectors of work.

The outflow of large numbers of Laotian migrant women who leave Laos for alternative employment opportunities in Thailand are part of the phenomenon of the feminization of migration. In the case of Laotian migrant women, in a policy brief by ILO and UN Women (2015), it reported that the Laotian migrant women worked mainly in domestic work, followed by agriculture, and construction. OECD/ILO (2017:46) also stated that "Lao women are largely employed as domestic workers and therefore represent the majority of migration out of Lao PDR". This further suggests that Laotian migrant women are often found in informal and feminized work sectors.

The problem with informal and feminized work sectors is that it often falls outside official channels and conveniently denies Laotian migrant women legal protection when working in these informal and feminized work sectors. This is confirmed by ILO (2019) which reported that “although a major sector of employment in Thailand, the migration of Lao women abroad for domestic work occurs outside of formal channels. Confusion remains over the legality of Lao women migrating for domestic work due to ambiguities in the Labour Law and associated decrees that restrict movement of Lao workers into jobs that are considered unskilled, offer few learning opportunities or are contrary to cultural traditions.” This further suggests that these Laotian migrant women are vulnerable to labour exploitation in terms of low-paying jobs, and even sexual exploitation in these informal and feminized work sectors.

Aida (2006) reported that the feminized migration trend has been progressing since the late 1970s, where in 1976, women were less than 15% of Asian overseas workers. However, by 2000, they had constituted about 50% or more of the migrant workforce in Asia. Aida (2006) added that women are recruited into women-specific skilled and unskilled jobs in the formal and informal service sectors. The feminized types of jobs are further elaborated by ILO and UN Women (2015:3), which states that “a pull from countries of destination that have a demand for women to fill feminized sectors of labour. This work is largely low skilled and low paid with a significant amount being in the domestic work and care sector.”

The feminized work sectors are an important consequence of the feminization of migration. The feminized work sectors reproduce the dominant patriarchal structure in society, which further limits migrant women’s structure and agency (Rigg, 2007). Hence, this unintentionally creates the condition for further gender bias and gender discrimination by focusing on gender-biased jobs for migrant women. Yeoh (2016) acknowledges the prevalence of the gender gap in various domains, despite the increasing phenomenon of feminization of transnational migration. In addition, Aida (2006) stated that many Laotian female workers engage in domestic work while men engage in agriculture, construction or fishery and related jobs.

According to Institute of Development Studies, Brighton (1993), there is a gendered division of labour in Laos, which is a contributing push factor for the

phenomenon of Laotian migrant women leaving Laos to work in Thailand. For instance, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton (1993:6) stated that “women face a number of constraints which deny them access to the means required to increase their labour productivity. Aside from the burden of housework, Laotian women lack skills training in agriculture as there are no government extension services in the country. Even when this service did exist prior to 1975, women were denied access to agricultural training. Instead, they were taught sewing and cookery. This reflects traditional stereotypes which view only males as farmers.” Institute of Development Studies, Brighton (1993:8) added that “where women have found employment in the formal sector, their jobs are often gender typed and concentrated at lower levels. In factory employment, men outnumber women in all areas except for garment production. In the civil service, women are well represented in the education and health departments but seldom occupy directorial or managerial positions even in these ministries. Similarly, in the industrial sector, women are factory workers but rarely, if ever, managers.” Hence, this suggests that there is a lack of well-paying jobs for Laotian migrant women in Laos, which necessitates them to look for better paying jobs outside Laos and into Thailand. This fits the neoclassical theory of migration where better economic opportunities and wages are sought when migrating from one country to another. This example also reinforces the gender segregation in terms of jobs that are “better fit” for men as compared to women, which further reinforces gender bias and gender discrimination.

2.2.1 Conditions of Feminization

I posit that the condition of feminization experienced by Laotian migrant women is compounded by the following factors.

Wage differentials

Laotian migrant women are paid significantly lesser than Laotian migrant men, even when the women are doing the same job as the men. For instance, IOM (2016:19) reported that “in terms of monthly wages, female (Laotian) migrant workers received an average of THB 9,408, whereas male (Laotian) migrant workers reported received an average of THB 9,882”. The issue of wage differentials is not

limited to Laotian migrant women. MMN (2020) also discussed wage differentials between Cambodian and Burmese migrant men and women working in the agricultural sector in Thailand, despite doing the same jobs. This is because the employers perceived the male migrant workers as stronger and better workers than the female migrant workers.

Weak labour protection rights and policy

There is insufficient and weaker labour protection rights and policy for Laotian migrant women compared to Laotian migrant men. This is exacerbated by the situation of Laotian migrant women whom are found working in gender-specific jobs such as domestic work and the service industry, which are in the informal work sector and hence, difficult to enforce labour protection rights and policy for Laotian migrant women working in these jobs. Laotian migrant women working in gender-specific jobs with informal work arrangements are also liable to being victims of the sex industry or exploited as trafficked victims. Aida (2006) reported that (Laotian) women frequently end up in the low-status, low-wage exploitation and service jobs, and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including sexual abuse. Aida (2006) added that the most concentrated work available for women is domestic work and prostitution.

Unskilled and/or low-skilled work

Laotian migrant women are often found doing gender-specific jobs with unskilled or low-skilled work. This is often exacerbated by the lack of or limited formal education of Laotian migrant women compared to Laotian migrant men. For instance, IOM (2016:5) reported that “in terms of education levels among (Lao) male and female migrants, male migrants reported having a higher overall education level. Of those migrants with no education at all, a far larger proportion were female (63.6%) than male (36.4%)”.

Hence, the combination of the factors of wage differentials, weaker labour protection rights and policy, and doing unskilled or low-skilled work are the conditions of feminization that attribute to negative consequences experienced by these Laotian migrant women. These compounded factors perpetuate Laotian migrant

women's less-than-desirable situation of working in gender-specific jobs in Thailand, whom are paid lesser than their male counterparts, face weak labour protection rights and policy especially in the informal work sector, and whom are doing unskilled and or low-skilled work due to little or no education. Laotian migrant women who cross borders to find work in Thailand have limited economic opportunities as they often could only find employment in feminized and informal work sectors, which is also due to their limited education levels.

2.3 Vulnerability

The conditions of feminization of migration, namely wage differentials, weaker labour protection rights and policy, and unskilled or low-skilled work, exacerbated by the feminization process increases the vulnerability of Laotian migrant women in feminized work sectors. Being limited to work in feminized work sectors due to their limited education levels also means that the Laotian migrant women have limited further cross-border mobility in Thailand.

This suggests that Laotian migrant women are particularly vulnerable, as they are often trapped in working in feminized work sectors due to limited educational opportunities, which often limit their work opportunities and they are stuck in jobs with lower wages, weaker labour protection and rights. Aida (2006) examined the vulnerabilities of female migrants towards specific reproductive health issues vis-à-vis the low formal educational completion rate especially among girls in rural areas. This suggests that Laotian migrant women with little or no education often find themselves having to fill gender-specific jobs which do not require any skills or require only a limited level of skills.

I posit that Laotian migrant women are especially risky to sudden shocks, such as the current global situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of manual labour are laid off as employers do not have enough cash flow to maintain manpower. An immediate consequence to that is the migrant workers are forced to go back to their home countries, as they are unemployed and could not afford to continue paying for their living expenses in a foreign country. For instance, according to the Straits Times (2020), “tens of thousands of jobless migrant workers from Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia have been

scrambling to leave Thailand since shops and retail outlets were shuttered in its major cities to contain the coronavirus outbreak, raising fears of a fresh wave of cross-border infections”. The Straits Times (2020) article also captured a qualitative comment from a Lao migrant woman who said that back home, she could have some rice to eat, but if she remained in Bangkok, she could not afford to buy basic things such as food. This shows that when faced with such a situation, these Laotian migrant women would be put in a difficult situation as they need the job in order to remit money back home for their family to use, and to take care of their family through economic means. This means that in the current global pandemic, this group of Laotian migrant women is the most vulnerable to sudden external changes to their employment or environment. Hence, during the COVID-19 pandemic, these Laotian migrant women are the most vulnerable and have little or no agency over various aspects of their mobility, especially their physical mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic thus increases the vulnerability of these Laotian migrant women and limits their physical mobility, which further impacts their economic mobility. As Laotian migrant women are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is increasingly important to pay attention to this group of Laotian migrant women and assess various aspects of their vulnerabilities. This is because the current global pandemic does not enable agency of Laotian migrant women in their present circumstances. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly limits the physical movement, and by extension the mobility of these Laotian migrant women, in addition to government and top-down laws and strict instructions on physical movement during the current global pandemic. Hence, it is important to look at the degree of immobility that Laotian migrant women currently face due to the global pandemic and their extent of vulnerability as a result of sudden external changes in work and the environment due to the global pandemic.

For the purpose of this thesis, the term vulnerability is conceptualized using the social sciences approach, such as socio-demographic vulnerability and socio-economic vulnerability. Elmhirst (2013: 72) terms “vulnerability as a quality held by human agents, while others give emphasis to vulnerability produced through the inequities of social structures.” Hence, I use the term vulnerability in the social sciences approach for the purpose of my research, specifically in the context of

Laotian migrant women who migrate from Laos to Thailand in search of employment, and the vulnerabilities that they face due to their positionality as migrant workers and as women.

In defining the vulnerabilities that Laotian migrant women face while living and working in Thailand, I refer to Mustafa's vulnerability assessment tool (cited by Elmhirst 2013: 72) where it "identifies levels of vulnerability and capacity within households or within communities in terms of material vulnerabilities (roughly equivalent in income, education and material assets), institutional vulnerabilities (social networks, kinship ties, infrastructure, warning systems, social exclusion or marginalization), and attitudinal vulnerabilities (including empowerment and knowledge)." Based on these terms of vulnerability, my research examines the conditions of feminization of migration, in the form of wage differentials, weaker labour protection rights and policy, and unskilled or low-skilled work, which is exacerbated by the feminization process and increases various aspects of vulnerability of Laotian migrant women in feminized work sectors (i.e. domestic work, agriculture, services, and garment factory). This suggests that Laotian migrant women are particularly vulnerable, as they are often trapped in working in these feminized work sectors due to limited educational opportunities, which often also affects their work opportunities. As a result, they are mostly stuck in low-skilled jobs with lower wages, weaker labour protection rights and policy.

2.4 Gender Empowerment

Gender is an important concept in understanding the feminization of transnational migration. I use gender as a lens in analyzing the labour migratory flows from Laos to Thailand, with a focus on Laotian migrant women in Northeast and Central Thailand. I refer to Peet and Hartwick (2015)'s feminist framework of gender and development. Peet and Hartwick (2015) focuses on the gender relations between men and women and the imbalance of power relations between men and women. Mahler and Pessar (2006) discussed the importance to draw on gender as a central role in understanding the complexities of migration. In other articles, Mahler and Pessar (2001) and (2003) also discussed the framework of "gendered geographies of power", the importance in analyzing gender in relation to transnational migration.

The gendered lens perspective is useful in seeing how the dominant patriarchal structure in society is reproduced through delegating women to gender-specific jobs in the feminization of transnational migration, thereby creating gender inequality at various levels.

I use gender empowerment to further discuss the possibility of elevating Laotian migrant women's situation in informal and feminized work sectors that is perpetuated by the feminization of transnational migration. Mandal (2013:18) defined the term empowerment as a "multidimensional social process and it helps people gain control over their own lives...as a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they think as important." According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2001:3), "empowerment is a process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment." With the definitions by UNHCR (2001) and Mandal (2013), it can be seen that the common understanding of the term empowerment means having a sense of control over lives and environment.

Mandal (2013) further discussed the types of empowerment, namely social empowerment, economic empowerment, educational empowerment, political empowerment, and psychological empowerment. Mandal (2013:24) also discussed the methods of empowerment, such as "attaining education, increasing entrepreneurial qualities, acquiring land, participation in political process". Hence, I posit that gender empowerment can be used as an important tool to improve the lives and circumstances of Laotian migrant women through the types and methods of empowerment. For instance, UNHCR (2001) used the Longwe women's empowerment framework, where there are five dimensions of women's empowerment: access, conscientization, mobilization, control, and gender equality mainstreaming. Although this was used in the context of forced migrants (i.e. women refugees in South Africa), the five dimensions of Longwe women's empowerment framework are still relevant as a reference for creating gender indicators of women's empowerment for Laotian migrant women who are voluntary migrants. According to UNHCR (2001:5), the dimensions are "the ability of women to access resources

(access), exercise self-awareness with respect to their rights (conscientization), mobilize around their rights (mobilize), control their environment with a facility equal to that of men (control), and gender-equality of results within institutions (gender equality mainstreaming).”

2.4.1 Gender Indicators

The types and methods of empowerment is further understood in relation to gender indicators, such as gender inequality index, which measures reproductive health and family planning, violence against girls and women, socioeconomic empowerment, with a focus on socioeconomic empowerment of women. I refer to Global Environment Facility (GEF) (2017)’s gender equality guidelines which are specific to gender equality and the environment, namely: i) unequal access to and control of natural resources, ii) unbalanced participation and decision making in environmental planning and governance at all levels, and iii) uneven access to socio-economic benefits and services.

On unequal access to and control of natural resources, GEF (2017) suggests that women has less access to and control of natural resources compared to men. On unbalanced participation and decision making in environmental planning and governance at all levels, GEF (2017) suggests that women do not have the same opportunities as men in decision making on the use and management of natural resources. On uneven access to socio-economic benefits and services, GEF (2017) suggests that women do not have the same income-generating opportunities and access as men. I acknowledged how GEF (2017) crafted gender equality guidelines with specific relation between gender and the environment, and tailored some of their guidelines to my indicators of gender empowerment. On unequal access to and control of natural resources, I expanded it to the access to and control of resources such as land, house, and money, under economic indicator of gender empowerment. On unbalanced participation and decision making in environmental planning and governance at all levels, I expanded it to the participation and leadership in decision-making in planning and governance at the self, family, community, society and state, under political indicator of women’s empowerment. On uneven access to socio-economic benefits and services, I expanded it to the access to socio-economic benefits

and services, such as overtime payment, time spent in economic activities, minimum wage, job opportunity, and maternity leave, under economic indicator of women's empowerment.

Next, I refer to BRIDGE (2007)'s gender indicators, specifically on Gender Equity Index (GEI), Gender Gap Index (GGI), and Gender Status Index (GSI). These three sets of indicators measured women's participation in the economy and politics, the educational attainment of women, as well as the health and wellbeing of women. I acknowledged the relevance of these indicators and incorporated some aspects of the GEI, GGI, and GSI into my economic, political, and social indicators of gender empowerment.

Last, I refer to United Nations Statistics Division (2019)'s gender indicators, which are categorized into the following: i) economic structures, participation in economic activities and access to resources, ii) education, iii) health and related services, iv) public life and decision making, and v) human rights of women and girl children. Similarly, I grouped my indicators of gender empowerment into economic, political, and social indicators which reflected some of the gender indicators from United Nations Statistics Division (2019).

I referred to several organizations' interpretations on gender empowerment and gender indicators such as Mandal (2013)'s types of empowerment, UNHCR (2001)'s Longwe women's empowerment framework, GEF (2017)'s Guidelines on Gender Equality, BRIDGE (2007)'s Gender and Indicators, and United Nations Statistics Division (UN) (2019)'s Minimum Set of Gender Indicators. The gender indicators are thus re-conceptualized as follows within UNHCR (2001)'s Longwe Women's Empowerment Framework to measure gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women using the following indicators:

Access

Laotian migrant women's access to resources and rights

Self-Awareness

Laotian migrant women's self-awareness of gender discrimination and the implication of gender discrimination in their access to resources and rights

Mobilization

Laotian migrant women's ability to mobilize resources and rights, by increasing others' self-awareness on the implication of gender discrimination in their access to resources and rights

Control

Laotian migrant women's ability to control their external environment and dictate their circumstances after being able to mobilize resources and rights

Gender Equality

Laotian migrant women's ability to be on equal power relations with that of Laotian migrant men by having all aspects of access, self-awareness, mobilization, and control

The gender indicators listed above are thus important in assessing the types and methods of gender empowerment. The gender indicators listed above will also be useful for my research in ascertaining the impact of gender empowerment on Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand, by analyzing the economic, legal, and social aspects of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors of domestic work, agricultural work, services work, and garment factory work.

In summary, mobility of Laotian migrant women is strongly related to the concept of gender empowerment. I relate the concept of gender empowerment and how the methods of empowerment explicated by Mandal (2013) could facilitate various aspects of mobility for Laotian migrant women working in Thailand. For instance, Mandal (2013) discussed educational empowerment, economic empowerment, social empowerment, political empowerment, and psychological empowerment. For instance, educational empowerment and economic empowerment can enhance economic mobility, which further enhances social mobility and cultural mobility. Social empowerment can enhance social mobility which can also enhance economic mobility and cultural mobility. This suggests that there are many variations of achieving different aspects of mobility through the different types and methods of gender empowerment.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

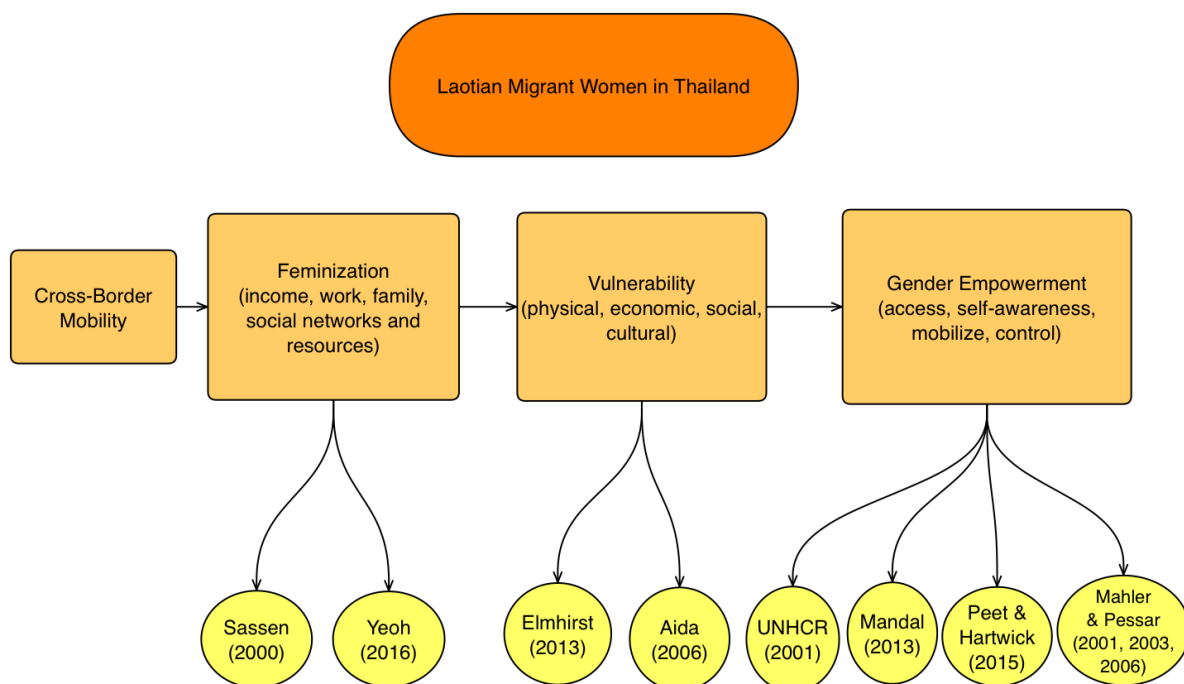


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

I situate my research within the conceptual framework of the concepts of feminization of transnational migration, vulnerability, and gender empowerment in the context of cross-border mobility, as seen in Figure 2.

Cross-border mobility provides the larger context to my research on the large-scale labour migratory flows of Laotian migrant women to Thailand and working in feminized work sectors. Feminization of transnational migration provides larger context in understanding the large-scale migratory flows of Laotian migrant women from Laos to Thailand and focusing on Laotian migrant women in feminized work sectors. Feminization of transnational migration is assessed through the four indicators of income, work, family, social networks and resources. Vulnerability is used to assess the degree of vulnerability created by the conditions of feminization, namely wage differentials, weaker labour protection rights and policy, and low-skilled or un-skilled work. Four aspects of vulnerability are examined through this research, namely physical vulnerability, economic vulnerability, social vulnerability, and cultural vulnerability. Gender empowerment is used to examine Laotian migrant women's stages of gender empowerment, and

to further discuss the possibility of elevating Laotian migrant women's situation in feminized work sectors perpetuated by the conditions of feminization and vulnerability through the role of stakeholders. Gender indicators are used as tools to examine different types of empowerment and if methods of empowerment are present or absent in the circumstances of Laotian migrant women, and the impact of gender empowerment on various aspects of Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility.



CHAPTER THREE – LAOTIAN MIGRANT WOMEN’S FEMINIZATION AND VULNERABILITY

In this chapter, I first present my main cases of Laotian migrant women working in the different work sectors, to answer my first research question on the extent that the feminization process affects Laotian migrant women’s cross-border mobility, as well as my second research question on the consequences of the feminization process and the COVID-19 pandemic on Laotian migrant women’s vulnerability.

3.1 Main Cases: Laotian Migrant Women

In this section, I present my main cases of Laotian migrant women by introducing their profile and demographics, based on my research findings and preliminary data. I discuss the important themes that arose from my main cases, using thematic and content analysis, with additional support from my supplementary cases of key informants.

First, the 11 Laotian migrant women whom are my main cases worked in a variety of work sectors in Thailand, namely agricultural work, factory work, services work, and domestic work. Figure 3 summarizes the number of Laotian migrant women in each work sector and location of each work sector.

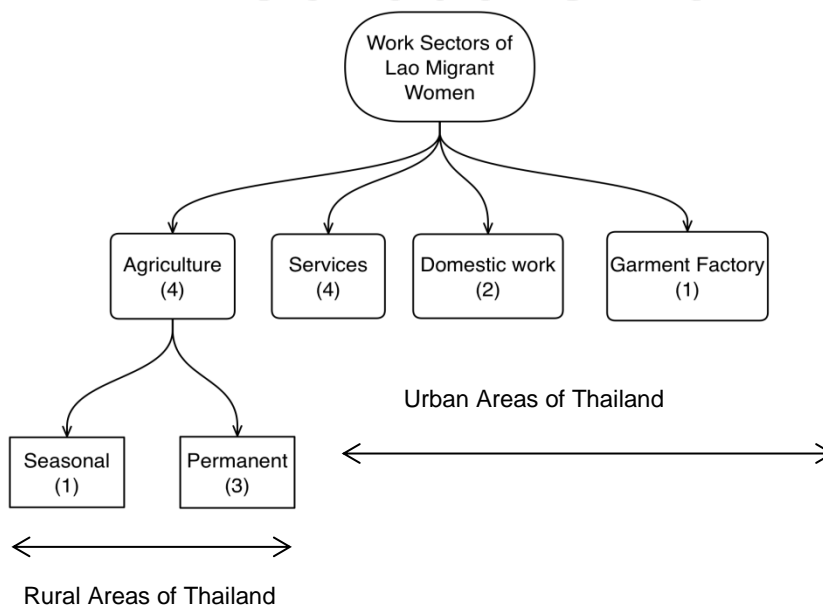


Figure 3: Overview of Laotian Migrant Women in the Work Sectors

As seen in Figure 3, there are four Laotian migrant women working in agriculture, where one works as a seasonal agricultural worker while the remaining three work as permanent agricultural workers. There are four Laotian migrant women working in services, such as selling desserts, serving food in a restaurant or cafe, and selling clothes. There are two Laotian migrant women working as domestic helpers in the house. There is one Laotian migrant woman working in a garment factory. The seven Laotian migrant women working in domestic work, services, and garment factory are all based in the urban areas of Thailand, specifically in Bangkok city. The remaining four Laotian migrant women working in agriculture are based in the rural areas of Thailand, specifically in Mukdahan province.

3.1.1 Profile and Demographics

I elaborate on the characteristics of my main cases of Laotian migrant women, specifically on their profile and demographics, according to their work sectors. It is important to note that for my main cases of Laotian migrant women, I managed to meet some of them in person before the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, I will elaborate on the profile and demographics of the Laotian migrant women in each work sector by going through the information I got before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1.2 Agricultural Work Sector

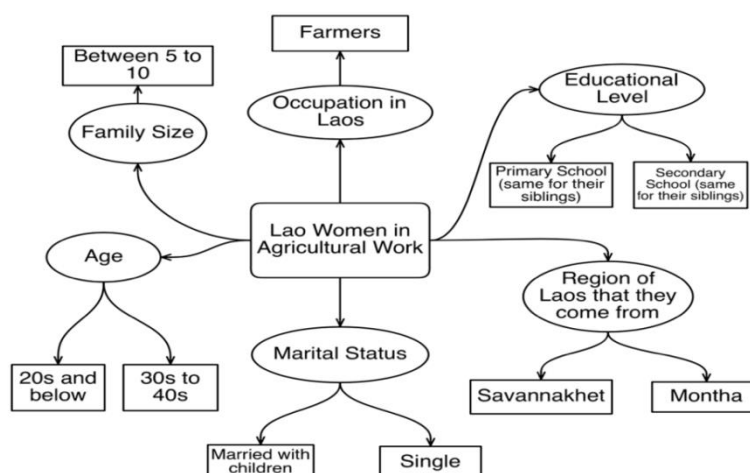


Figure 4: Laotian Migrant Women in Agricultural Work

Information collected before the COVID-19 pandemic

As seen in Figure 4, for the Laotian migrant women in agriculture, I met additional four of them before the COVID-19 pandemic by travelling to Mukdahan province, and staying with them for a few days at their workplace. They were all doing seasonal agricultural work in Mukdahan province. Four of them had slightly different age groups, two are below 20s while two are in their mid-20s. For the ones whom are in their mid-20s, they are married with young children while the ones whom are below 20s are single and do not have any children. All of them are from Savannakhet province in Laos, and they are all distant family relatives and friends from the same village. They chose to come to Mukdahan province in Thailand as it is very near to their village in Savannakhet province in Laos. It is important to note that for this group, they did seasonal agricultural work, which meant that they worked in Mukdahan for only a month, before going back to Laos. They shared that their family mainly did farming in Laos, which is also seasonal work. Only two had up till secondary school education, while the other two of them studied only up till primary school level. It is also important to note that two of them had worked in Bangkok before coming to work in Mukdahan province.

Information collected during the COVID-19 pandemic

As seen in Figure 4, for the Laotian migrant women in agriculture, there is slight diversity in their age groups. Bua is just below 20, while Pan, Dok, and Foy are more mature and in their 30s to 40s. Pan, Dok, and Foy are married with children currently studying at the primary school and secondary school levels, while Bua is single and do not have any children. Majority of them are from Savannakhet province in Laos, such as Bua, Dok and Foy. It is important to note that Savannakhet is a border province between Laos and Thailand. Pan is from the central part of Laos. All of them have large families in Laos. For instance, Bua has 5 family members in Laos, while Foy has 8 family members in Laos. All of their families' occupations in Laos are farming work, such as growing rice and rearing animals for poultry. Bua, Dok, and Foy studied up till secondary education, while Pan studied only till primary

education. All of their siblings also had similar level of education as them. It is important to note that majority of these Laotian migrant women, as Pan, Dok, and Foy, are doing permanent agricultural work throughout the year in Mukdahan, and are also settled down with their Thai partners and children based in Thailand. Only Bua does seasonal agricultural work in Mukdahan and after completing her work, she returned back to Laos.

3.1.3 Services Work Sector

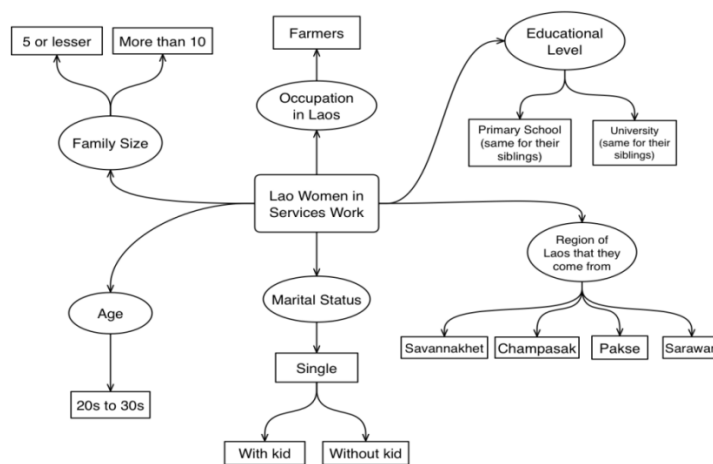


Figure 5: Laotian Migrant Women in Services Work

Information collected before the COVID-19 pandemic

As seen in Figure 5, for the Laotian migrant women in services work, I met additional two of them before the COVID-19 pandemic at their workplace, where they were doing cleaning work at an office canteen in Bangkok city. Two of them have different age groups, one is in her early 20s while another one is in her late 30s. For the one in her early 20s, she is not married while the one in her late 30s was married before with children at the primary school and secondary school levels. Two of them are from Sarawan province in Laos. The size of their family in Laos can be very large, as they shared that a family can have up to 16 children, due to poor birth control and family planning in Laos. The additional thing is that most of the time, Laotian women start their own families at a very young age, such as when they are just in their early 20s or even under their 20s. They also shared that in Laos, they farm crops such as corn and sweet potato. However, the nature of such farming work is

seasonal work, and can be done only once a year. This leaves them with a lot of free time and not much additional work to do in Laos. These additional two Laotian migrant women also shared that they did not have much education in Laos. Only one had up till secondary school education, while another one did not study at all.

Information collected during the COVID-19 pandemic

As seen in Figure 5, for the Laotian migrant women in services work, majority are relatively young, such as Mai, Din, and Rak who are in their early 20s, while Ton is in her early 30s. All of them are not married. However, Ton was pregnant with her first child at the time of interview. They are all from diverse rural areas of Laos, such as Champasak, Savannakhet, Pakse, and Sarawan. It is important to note that Savannakhet and Pakse are border provinces between Laos and Thailand. The size of their families in Laos is varied, from small to very large families. For instance, Mai and Din only have 3 family members in Laos, while Rak has 12 family members in Laos. However, all of their families do farming work in Laos. There are some variations in their levels of education. For instance, Mai and Ton only studied till primary education, but Din and Rak managed to graduate from a university in Laos. Most of the time, their siblings had similar levels of education as them. Hence, if they had the opportunity to study up till university, their siblings also had the chance to study up till university. This suggests that half of the Laotian migrant women in this group are more educated than the Laotian migrant women in other groups. It is important to note that all of them are working in services work in Bangkok city.

3.1.4 Domestic Work Sector

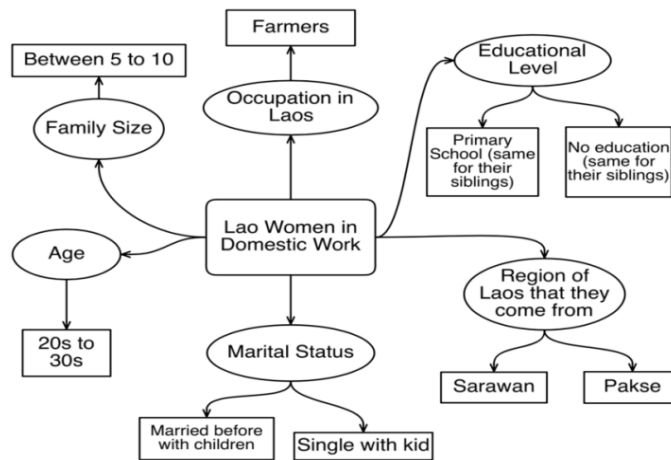


Figure 6: Laotian Migrant Women in Domestic Work

Information collected during the COVID-19 pandemic

As seen in Figure 6, for the Laotian migrant women in domestic work, Gek and Bee are in their late 20s and late 30s respectively. Their marital status is slightly unique. Bee was married before, while Gek is not married, and both of them have children who are at the primary school and secondary school levels. Bee and Gek are from the rural areas of Laos, namely Sarawan and Pakse respectively. It is important to note that Pakse is a border province between Laos and Thailand. The size of their families in Laos is large. For instance, Bee has 8 family members in Laos, while Gek has 10 family members in Laos. Their families' occupations in Laos are the same, as they do farming and gardening work in Laos. For these Laotian migrant women however, they have very limited educational opportunities. Bee did not have any education, while Gek only studied till primary education. Their siblings had similar level of education as them. It is important to note that these Laotian migrant women are all working in Bangkok city, and are also settled down in Thailand with their Thai partners, while their children and other family members are based in Laos.

3.1.5 Garment Factory Work Sector

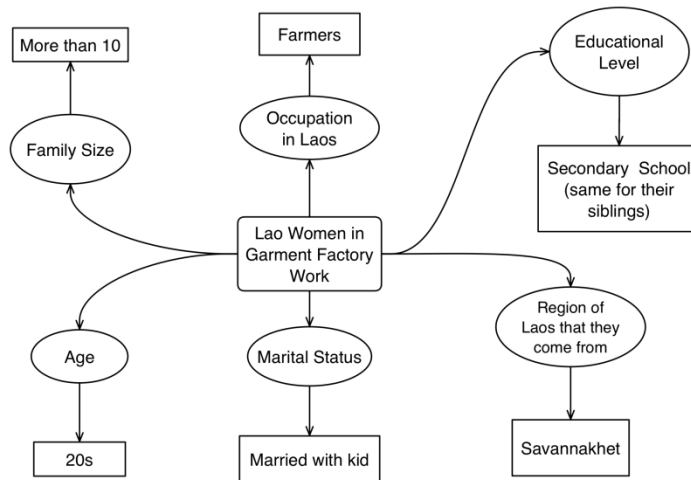


Figure 7: Laotian Migrant Women in Garment Factory Work

Information collected during the COVID-19 pandemic

As seen in Figure 7, for the Laotian migrant women in the garment factory work sector, it is important to note that I only managed to interview one case due to research constraints and limitations. Faa is in her mid-20s, and she is married and pregnant with her first child at the time of interview. Faa is from Savannakheth province in Laos. It is important to note that Savannakheth is a border province between Laos and Thailand. Faa travelled from Savannakheth province in Laos to Nakhon Pathom province in Thailand to work in a garment factory. Faa has a large family in Laos, with 13 family members. Faa's family does farming work in Laos. Faa studied up till secondary education, which is similar to her other siblings in Laos.

3.1.6 Summary of Main Cases

In summary, it can be seen that majority of these Laotian migrant women come from poorer and more rural regions of Laos, such as Pakse and Savannakheth, as compared to other regions such as Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang in Laos. Some of these rural regions of Laos where these Laotian migrant women came from are also border provinces between Laos and Thailand. It can also be seen that majority of these Laotian migrant women marry early and have their own family in their 20s. Majority of these Laotian migrant women also come from large families in Laos who

do mainly farming work in Laos, with limited education for themselves. It can be inferred that for the family composition in Laos, there are more youth than elderly in their homes. Due to the large family size in Laos, it can also be inferred that majority of the Laotian migrant women do not have access to much education as a result of limited resources to spare for everyone in the family. This is shown by how majority of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed are educated up to primary school level, with a few who completed secondary school, and a very small number who are university graduates. This could be related to the cultural context of Laos, as Laotian women have lesser educational opportunities as compared to Laotian men. Parents would more likely give educational opportunities to their sons than daughters, which could be further related to the patriarchal familial context in Laos. On the other hand, in the case of Laotian men, it is also not uncommon to see some older male siblings who do not complete their education so that they could find jobs to contribute to the household and feed their family members, especially for their younger siblings in Laos.

3.2 Feminization Process on Laotian Migrant Women's Cross-Border Mobility

This section seeks to examine the extent in which the feminization process affects the cross-border mobility of Laotian migrant women, based on my research findings on Laotian migrant women and their key informants.

As theorized in Chapter 2, the feminization process is understood as the significant influx of Laotian migrant women travelling from Laos to Thailand mainly in search for work in Thailand. This feminization process is contributed by the underlying factor of gender segregation and gender discrimination in Laos, which necessitates them to migrate from Laos to Thailand in search of work. The degree of gender segregation and gender discrimination can be seen in the form of lesser education for Laotian women as compared to Laotian men, and the clear gender demarcation in terms of leadership and power that Laotian men have in Laotian society as compared to Laotian women. The conditions of feminization are wage differentials, weak labour protection rights and policy, and unskilled or low-skilled work.

I operationalize the term feminization process using the following indicators:

- I. income: the factor of gender on the amount of income earned by Laotian migrant women;
- II. work: the factor of gender on the type of jobs that Laotian migrant women do and their work conditions;
- III. family: the factor of gender on the role that Laotian migrant women play in their families; and
- IV. social networks and resources: the factor of gender on Laotian migrant women's social networks and resources.

Based on my research findings, I argue that the feminization process plays a large role in shaping Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility from Laos to Thailand. This can be seen through the four indicators of feminization (income, work, family, and social networks and resources) as defined above, with supporting evidence from my main cases of Laotian migrant women and supplementary cases of key informants.

Several key findings emerged from my structured qualitative interviews with Laotian migrant women across the diversity of work sectors and geographical locales that they work and come from. These key findings address the motivations that they had in terms of migration and implications resulting from their choices in migrating from Laos to Thailand. The main themes that arose from this first research objective and question of feminization of migration and cross-border mobility are related to Laotian migrant women's internal and external motivations behind why they leave their own country to come and work in Thailand. These internal and external motivations are often affected by the role of gender, gender segregation, and gender discrimination.

3.2.1 Indicator of Feminization: Income

For the diverse group of Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed, all of them said that they did farming for a living in Laos before coming to Thailand to work. This meant that although they did jobs in different work sectors in Thailand, they have the same work occupation in Laos. These Laotian migrant women did farming mainly with their family in Laos too. The only variation in their farming role

in Laos was that they did slightly different types of farming, ranging from rice farmer, to poultry farmer, and potato farmer.

On their internal motivations as to why they left their home country to come and work in Thailand, there is also a similar pattern in all of their responses. Majority of the Laotian migrant women said that the push factor in which they left Laos to find work in Thailand was mainly due to the nature of the main form of work in Laos, which is agriculture. Agricultural work, such as farming in Laos, is often more tedious and difficult for women as compared to men, due to the demands of physical labour for farming. For instance, Bee, who worked in commercial services work and is currently doing domestic work in Bangkok city, said that “it is very tiring being a farmer (in Laos), so I want an easier job, being a farmer is very hard.” Similarly, Ton, who worked in commercial services work in Bangkok, said that “The job in Laos is harder, because need to do the farm and stay under the sun, but here no need to do all these...I chose to come here myself, because in Laos there is not much work to do, so I decided to come here.”

In addition, the Laos economy is not producing enough jobs besides agricultural work, which is a push factor for Laotian women to decide to migrate and find employment in neighbouring countries such as Thailand. For instance, Dok, who have been working as a farmer in rural Thailand for many years, said that “Laos is too poor, cannot find job...There are no jobs in Laos.” Similarly, Foy, who have also been working as a farmer in rural Thailand for a few years, said that “It’s very hard to make a living in Laos...I don’t have any other job to do besides farming in Laos.”

A more pressing push factor related to their positionality as Laotian women is that in Laos, women are paid lesser than men, even when they are working on the same job. The issue of wage differentials due to the factor of gender can be seen in migrant agricultural workers from other countries, such as Myanmar and Cambodia. MMN (2020:26) shared in a report that there were wage differentials between men and women in agriculture, where the women get paid less with the employer justifying it by saying that men are stronger and work better than women, despite the fact that both male and female workers generally carry out the same duties.

In contrast, there are more jobs for Laotian migrant women to choose from in Thailand, which are also relatively easier for Laotian women to do as compared to

farming in Laos. In addition, Laotian migrant women are able to earn more pay as compared to in Laos. I gathered that the Laotian migrant women are able to earn at least two to three times more in terms of pay when they come to work in Thailand as compared to when they work in Laos. For instance, Mai, a 21 years old lady, is able to earn 12,000 B a month selling Thai desserts at a floating market in Bangkok as compared to 4,000 B a month farming in Laos. Another young lady, Bua, 17 years old working as seasonal worker in a bell pepper farm in Mukdahan earns between 8,000 B to 9,000 B a month in Mukdahan as compared to 4,000 B to 5,000 B a month in Laos. An older lady, Dok, 40 years old, working as a farmer in Mukdahan is able to earn between 6,000 B to 9,000 B a month in Thailand as compared to 3,000 B to 3,500 B a month in Laos. This is despite the fact that Dok does the same job as farming in both Mukdahan and in Laos. This clearly shows that for this diverse group of Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed, they belong to the category of voluntary migration, where they exercise choice in travelling from Laos to Thailand mainly for relatively easier work with higher pay and a better standard of living in Thailand as compared to in Laos. Hence, it is clear that based on my research findings, the factor of higher income contributes highly to Laotian migrant women's motivations to come and work in Thailand, and hence adding to their cross-border mobility.

More importantly, there are no wage differences in what the Laotian migrant women earned in Thailand as compared to their male counterparts. For instance, in the case of Bee, who worked as a canteen cleaner in Bangkok, has one Laotian male colleague and two other Laotian female colleagues. Bee shared that they all do the same work and receive the same pay. The only difference was that if any one did additional work, regardless of male or female, they could get more pay. In another case of Faa, who works at a clothes factory in Nakhon Pathom, also has one Laotian male colleague and two other Laotian female colleagues. Faa shared that they all do the same job, receive the same pay, have the same amount of rest. Faa shared that "males and females in the factory do the same job as me, both females and males get treated equally in the factory." Hence, it is clear that the issue of wage differentials between Laotian men and women doing the same work in Laos contributes to the feminization process of Laotian migrant women migrating and working in Thailand,

as there is no issue of wages differentials between Laotian men and women doing the same work in Thailand.

3.2.2 Indicator of Feminization: Work

Based on my interviews with the Laotian migrant women, I found out that there are gendered roles and responsibilities between men and women in the Laos context. Majority of the Laotian migrant women shared that women in Laos mainly do domestic work, while men in Laos do more physically intensive work, such as shooting animals in the forest and construction work. For instance, Mai in her 20s, shared that “the males have to go into the forest to find food, while the females stay at home to look after children.” Din in her 20s, added that “males in my country are made to do hard labour while the females are homemakers.” Another interesting observation by Rak in her 20s shared that “females do housework, do everything at home, but the males at home don’t need to do much, from what I observe.” Even when the main form of work is farming in Laos, there is also a gendered difference in the roles between men and women. For instance, Dok in her 40s, shared that “both male and female do farming but different roles in farming.” Foy in her 30s, added that “jobs between males and females are different, males are made to do harder jobs during farming.”

This suggests that the gendered work segregation play a role in the motivations of why Laotian migrant women decide to leave Laos to work in Thailand. Gender differences are apparent in Laos, with clear work segregation. This is because the preference for male labour is needed to do agricultural work which is the main form of work in Laos. Farming is physically intensive and hard labour for Laotian women, which is not as viable for Laotian women to work on the farm and fields as compared to the men. This suggests that Laotian men are more highly sought after as labour to work on the fields and farms as compared to the women. Hence, the economic landscape in Laos and the gendered segregation of roles for work are an external motivation for Laotian migrant women to leave Laos for Thailand.

The factor of gender has a strong effect on the type of work that Laotian migrant women find themselves doing in Thailand. In addition, the type of work that

they find themselves doing is also done mainly by women like themselves. This can be seen especially in the domestic work sector, agricultural work sector, and commercial services work sector. For instance, Mai, who sells Thai desserts at a floating market in Bangkok, shared that all her colleagues are female. Din, who worked as a waitress at a restaurant selling Isan food said that she mainly had female colleagues only. Pan, who works as a chilli farmer at Mukdahan, also shared that most of the workers in her team are also women from Laos. This is echoed by Foy, who also worked as a chilli farmer in Mukdahan, and shares that she had mainly female colleagues working with her on the farm.

The factor of gender on the type of work that Laotian migrant women do when they come and work in Thailand is seen more clearly from the perspectives of Thai employers and their preferences in hiring Laotian women as compared to Laotian men. For Thai employers of Laotian migrant women in agricultural work, both male and female Thai employers of Laotian migrant women doing agricultural work said that they preferred hiring migrant workers from Laos due to the language similarity. In addition, they prefer hiring female for the job. When probed further, both the male and female employer shared that females were better in picking the bell peppers as they had more delicate hands than men. Cha, the female employer, added that females were also more gentle, patient, and meticulous in picking the bell peppers. Cha also shared from her personal work experience that hiring male labour were more difficult to handle as they often drunk and smoked a lot, which led to other consequences and is a form of difficulty for her as an employer. On the other hand, Cha shared that her experience with female labour had been smooth so far, as they were mainly more obedient and hardworking in their jobs.

The preference for female labour can also be seen in the case of the male employer of Laotian migrant women in factory work. Sii, the male employer, shared that although he has hired a Laotian male worker, he indirectly said that he preferred hiring Laotian female workers as the Laotian women were more hardworking and could produce a higher volume of clothes done in a day, as compared to the Laotian man whom he hired. Sii also shared an anecdote where he was upset with the Laotian male worker in the beginning as he could not produce the amount of clothes at the factory because he was lazy and slept in for most of the day. Another negative trait

that he shared of the Laotian male worker was that he smoked a lot. This suggests the presence of feminized work sectors that Laotian migrant women are working in, based on the type of work and the comparable number of female labour that the employers hire as compared to male labour. Hence, this confirms that Laotian migrant women are mainly working in feminized work sectors, based on the type of work they do and employers' preference in hiring female labour. It is also clear that the dominant form of work that is mainly agricultural work in Laos necessitates Laotian migrant women to search for employment outside of Laos and contribute to Laotian migrant women working in feminized work sectors in Thailand. This further suggests that the feminization process in the form of work indicator has a strong effect on Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility.

3.2.3 Indicator of Feminization: Family

Based on my research findings of Laotian migrant women, the common pattern despite their different geographical origin in Laos is that they all come from relatively big families in Laos, with at least two other siblings up to 13 siblings in the family. Their large family background is an important background context when considering their gendered role as a Laotian woman in their family, in addition to the role of Laotian women in Laotian society. In Laos, there is a clear gender divide in terms of family and work obligations, with the emphasis of Laotian women being in charge of domestic matters, while Laotian men are clearly left out of domestic matters. Although both Laotian women and Laotian men help out together by working on the farm and fields, as agriculture being the main form of work in Laos is physically taxing and requires significant amount of labour, Laotian women have an added responsibility to take care of household chores such as cleaning and cooking, as well as caring for their family members in Laos. For instance, Mai shared that "the males have to go into the forest to find food, while the females stay at home to look after children." Din added that "men in my country are made to do hard labour while the females are homemakers."

The added responsibility of caring for family members in Laos is protracted especially when majority of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed come from large families, with children and elderly at home. Rak added that "I'm also

helping my sister look after her son (in Bangkok).” The gendered role of caring for family members also extends to other women in the family, especially after the Laotian migrant women left for Laos to find work in Thailand. In some cases of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed, the gendered role of caring returns to them after they have come back from Laos to Thailand for work. For instance, in the case of Bua, who has returned back to Laos after the seasonal work in Thailand is completed, shares that “My mother is not doing anything much now except looking after my younger brother and my grandmother, we help each other to look after my grandmother.” In the case of Faa, who is heavily pregnant at the time of interview, talks about the caring role that her younger sister will play for her after she delivers her baby in Thailand. She said that “my younger sister is here to stay with me, to help me with my pregnancy.”

Hence, Laotian migrant women have gendered roles to play in their families in Laos, such as the responsibility of remitting money back to their family members in Laos. In relating back to the large size of their families in Laos, the issue of remittance becomes even more important for these Laotian migrant women. Majority of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed shared that they gave a substantial amount of their pay to their family members in Laos. Most of the time, they give the remittance to the female figure in the house, such as their mother. For others, they give the remittance to their dependents, such as their children living and studying in Laos. Some of the Laotian migrant women also mentioned that they send money back to their family in Laos when they go back Laos to visit them, which usually happens during the Thai and Lao New Year called Songkran. As a result, these Laotian migrant women have only minimal savings left for themselves even as they continue working in Thailand. The way that the remittances are used by the family members of these Laotian migrant women differ. For some of them, their family members use the remittances to spend on daily necessities. For instance, Mai shared that “my mother use my money to spend on farming necessities.” Similarly, Bee shared that “I send money back to my family for my children and my mother in Laos, they use the money to buy necessities.” In addition, other Laotian women shared that their family members used the remittances for bigger purchases such as building a house in Laos. For instance, Faa shared that “my mother use the money to build the house in Laos.”

A small number of the Laotian migrant women shared that they did not remit money back to their family members in Laos. This is for this small group of Laotian migrant women, they have children living with them in Thailand, as they have set up their own family with their Thai partners. For instance, Dok and Foy said that they use most of their money on living expenses and taking care of their family in Thailand. For this group of Laotian migrant women, they mainly save up their money for the future of their children, such as investing for their education. For instance, Pan shared that “my wish is for me to be able to send my son to go to study well and give him a good job in future, I want to send my son to be a policeman or civil servant... I don't have much savings left, everything is used for my children.”

The gendered role of remitting money back to their family members in Laos also extends to other Laotian women in the family, such as their female siblings. For instance, Rak whom follows her elder sister to work in Bangkok, shares that “My elder sister came first (to Bangkok), she came here for a long time already. My sister wants to support our family so she come to work here.” Hence, it is clear that the gendered role of Laotian migrant women taking care of their families in Laos contributes to the feminization process of Laotian migrant women working in Thailand for better pay and higher remittances.

In the context of Laos, women in Laos are also perceived to need to get married early, in addition to having children and doing domestic duties, such as household chores and taking care of children. For instance, Rak in her early 20s, shared that “in my family we (females) need to get married because it is a tradition and culture.” This ascertains the importance for women in Laotian society to play their part in the family to be a good wife and good daughter, as a cultural expectation for Laotian women. This is in contrast to the cultural expectation for Laotian men, as not many Laotian men get married as young as Laotian women and start their families. In addition, even after Laotian men got married, they do not have as much familial expectation to take care of their family members back in Laos and sending back remittance as compared to the Laotian women. This might be due to the fact that Laotian men are expected to take care of their new families after getting married, as the male breadwinner of the house. There are mixed sentiments amongst the younger Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed regarding the cultural expectation of

getting married and having children for Laotian women. For instance, Rak said that “I think it’s not necessary for females to get married...I don’t want to get married because it is a waste, I am afraid of additional jobs like household jobs after getting married.” Din, another girl in her 20s, also voiced her sentiments on women and marriage, and said that “when you want to get married and you won’t get a chance to do further education, when you get married you need to do household chores.” This suggests that for the young Laotian women who went to work in Thailand, they have alternative visions and perspectives on women and marriage. This may further suggest that the reason that they come to work in Thailand is so that they could have an independent life in Thailand, rather than just fulfilling their role and duty as a woman to get married and have children early.

Hence, the feminization process using the family indicator suggests a strong compelling factor for Laotian migrant women to leave Laos and find work in Thailand, based on the factor of gender on the role that they play in their families and the cultural expectation of Laotian women to take care of their families back home in Laos.

3.2.4 Indicator of Feminization: Social Networks and Resources

Based on my research findings of Laotian migrant women, there seems to be a factor of gender on the amount of educational resources and opportunities provided for Laotian migrant women. Majority of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed have very limited educational opportunities, such as having to study up till primary school level or secondary school level. The only exception were two females who studied till university level in Laos.

Some of the qualitative interviews also revealed that in the context of Laos, they would give educational opportunities mainly to the sons than daughters, especially if they are born in a big family. This is especially the case when Laotian women are given lesser educational opportunities than Laotian men, hence necessitating Laotian women to start working early, especially for the older Laotian women with younger siblings. For instance, Bee who is oldest of all her siblings, started working in Thailand since she was fifteen years old. In addition, younger daughters have more educational opportunities than older daughters. Hence, in the

context of Laos, women have lesser educational opportunities than men. This is exacerbated when Laotian women are born in a large family with many siblings. Resources in the form of money and educational opportunities are spread thin when there are many people in the family to feed. For instance, Rak shared that “I have 10 people in my family, I’m the youngest, I have 2 brothers in Laos, 3 sisters in Bangkok, 2 sisters in Laos...All my siblings didn’t study because no money, my brother studied engineering, money is more spent on males than on females.” As a result, Laotian women are more compelled to leave Laos to find employment in other countries such as Thailand, so that they could create a better opportunity for themselves. This includes work opportunity and educational opportunity.

Laotian migrant women tap on their own social networks and resources to come and work in Thailand. Laotian migrant women’s knowledge of job opportunities in Thailand are often met by their social networks in Laos, such as their Laotian friends and Laotian relatives living in Thailand. In addition, majority of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed shared that they knew job opportunities in Thailand from their female Laotian friends or Laotian relatives whom were already working in Thailand. Most of the time, they would also be accompanied by their female Laotian friends or female Laotian siblings to come and work in Thailand. For instance, Dok shared that “my friend recommended me to come and work here (in Thailand) 20 years ago, I am still in contact with this friend who brought me here...I come with my friends, I am still in contact with them, through hand phone.” For some of the Laotian migrant women, they knew the job opportunities in Thailand from their sisters in Laos, who have gone to Thailand to work before. For instance, Bua shared that “my sister goes to Thailand by herself...I will take the bus, my sister has experience, she went before, so I will ask her how she go...My sister have a lot of friends, so she introduce this job to me.” Hence, it is clear that Laotian migrant women’s access to social networks and resources from Laotian family members and relatives working in Thailand facilitates and eases their feminization process of migrating and working in Thailand.

In contrast, a small number of them knew the job in Thailand from their previous employer in Thailand. However, most of them also shared that they did

not have any Thai friends and only knew their friends or relatives from Laos. For instance, Mai shared that “I don’t know much people here, I don’t talk to my friends who bring me here, I stay here myself. I don’t have Thai friends.” Bee also shared that “I know only those people, the people I know are from different families but not from the same place in Laos, but I just happen to know them, I don’t know any other people besides my friends.”

The only change in situation is that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for some of the Laotian migrant women, their Laotian friends or family members based in Thailand had gone back to Laos. This also meant that their social networks and the resources that they are able to derive from their networks may have changed due to the COVID-19 situation. For instance, Mai shared that “my friends introduce me to this new job, but my friends went back home already.” Bee also shared that “my youngest sister came to work in Thailand then had a husband here but now she went back to Laos already (because of COVID)...I know a lot of people here, I have relatives here...Me and my friends are not meeting up with each other because of COVID.”

There is also gender segregation in terms of social treatment between men and women. There is a traditional male superiority mindset and gender hierarchy in Laos, as men are always the village heads while women are relegated to the domestic realm. This emphasizes the leadership of men in Laos. From what I gathered from the group of Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed, the power is being mainly held by men in the village while women in the village do not have any form of power at all. This is shown by the ownership of land and house, which is mainly by men, with the exception that the man of the household passes away. This suggests that Laotian men own and gain access to more resources than Laotian women. In addition, all of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed said that they did not come across a female village head in Laos before, and all of the village heads in Laos are men. For instance, Rak shared that “My village head is a male, females cannot be village head.” Similarly, Foy said that “village head is a male. Usually they will not let the females have leadership roles, it is just like that.” The inferiority of women’s position in Laotian society can be inferred from Dok who said that “women are not treated as well as men.”

3.3 Vulnerability of Laotian Migrant Women vis-à-vis the Feminization Process

This section seeks to investigate the aspects of vulnerability that Laotian migrant women face in relation to the feminization process of transnational migration. It is important to take into account the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in which this research is conducted, and how the COVID-19 pandemic further affected the Laotian migrant women's vulnerability and consequences from the feminization process of transnational migration. I use both my main cases of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors, namely services, agriculture, domestic work, and garment factory sector, as well as supplementary cases of key informants.

As theorized in Chapter 2, the term vulnerability is understood as the consequences that Laotian migrant women face based on the conditions of the feminization process, which had been defined as lower wages, weaker labour protection rights and policy, and low-skilled work or unskilled work experienced by Laotian migrant women in feminized work sectors in Thailand. Vulnerability is thus understood as the consequences that Laotian migrant women face while living and working in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I operationalize the term vulnerability using the following indicators:

- I. physical vulnerability: the factor of Laotian migrant women's physique and appearance as a woman, such as physical strength, health and safety, and how it attributes to their vulnerability as migrant women;
- II. economic vulnerability: the factor of Laotian migrant women's type of work, amount of pay, and work benefits such as healthcare, and how it attributes to their vulnerability as migrant women;
- III. social vulnerability: the factor of Laotian migrant women's social networks, resources, and their knowledge of social organizations, and how it attributes to their vulnerability as migrant women; and
- IV. cultural vulnerability: the factor of Laotian migrant women's perception and enactment of their role in their Laotian families, and how it attributes to their vulnerability as migrant women.

Based on my research findings, I argue that Laotian migrant women face several consequences from the conditions of the feminization process and the

COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to several aspects of their vulnerability as migrant women. This is examined through the four indicators of vulnerability as defined above.

Several key findings emerged from my structured qualitative interviews with Laotian migrant women across the diversity of work sectors and geographical locales that address the aspects of vulnerability these Laotian migrant women face while coming to work in Thailand. These key findings address the different kinds of risk and difficulties that they experienced while living and working in Thailand, which also relates to the different kinds of vulnerability that they are subjected to as Laotian migrant women. The main themes that arose from this second research objective and question are related to the way that they travelled from Laos to Thailand, in terms of legal or illegal entry, whether they went via the official or unofficial route, the types of work they do as official worker or unofficial worker in Thailand, and the type of identification and work documents that they hold when they entered Thailand. All these factors contributed to different aspects of their vulnerability as Laotian migrant women. The consequences are also exacerbated by their nationality and gender, positionality as a minority group in Thailand and being female. The aspects of vulnerability of Laotian migrant women, such as the extent of exploitation and sexual harassment, will be compared based on the four work sectors that each group of Laotian migrant women worked in.

3.3.1 Indicator of Vulnerability: Physical

Based on the research findings of Laotian migrant women, a significant number of them mentioned that they came to Thailand with the accompaniment of a female counterpart, such as their sister or female friend. For instance, Rak who is in her early 20s, said that “my parents are not worried about me when I work here because I have my sister here with me.” This applies to Laotian migrant women in almost all the four work sectors. This suggests the physical vulnerability of Laotian migrant women, as they found it necessary to travel together with other women similar to them. As for those Laotian migrant women who travelled alone, their family members expressed concern and worry for them as a woman travelling alone. For instance, Faa said that “my family is worried for me when I come here to work

because I am a woman.” Similarly, Din shared that “my family is worried for me staying here, they are concerned for me because I am the first one to come here (Thailand) to work.” This further relates to the physical safety and by extension, the physical vulnerability of Laotian migrant women who come to live and work in Thailand.

Some of the Laotian migrant women in the services and domestic work sector expressed physical vulnerability by describing their physically intensive work, and also the lack of adequate rest hours and rest days at work. They shared that their work was quite physically taxing for them. For some of them, they elaborated that they had less than adequate rest during work which leads them to experience physical fatigue more often at work. This was based on interviews with the Laotian migrant women working in the services and domestic work sector. Majority of the Laotian migrant women especially in the services and domestic work sector worked more than 10 hours a day, with one of them who said that she had to work 15 hours a day. Mai, who sells Thai desserts at a local floating market, elaborated that “I work from 6am to 9pm everyday, not much off time, 2-3 months then I have 1 day of break, I don’t go anywhere on my rest day.” This shows that she is made exhausted by the work that she does, due to the lack of leave days and adequate rest that she had to stay at home to rest on her only rest day. This further suggests the extent of physical vulnerability that they experience while living and working in Thailand, due to lesser rest time and more working hours or more physically demanding type of work. For instance, Bee who just changed her job from services to domestic work, shared that “I feel tired working in my new job, there’s more rest at my old job, no need to use so much strength...I am not settling well in my new job because it is very tiring.” This shows that for Bee, she had more rest time and had less physically intensive work in the services sector than in the domestic work sector.

A small number of the Laotian migrant women also expressed physical vulnerability in the form of how they were treated by their employers. For instance, Din shared that her workplace was not in favourable workplace to be in, as she describes her employer as “very fierce”. Din, who worked as a waitress at a restaurant selling Isan food, shared that employees at the restaurant, including her colleagues get treated poorly by the employer, and all of her colleagues are female. Din elaborated

that “the owner of the shop is very fierce, I always get scolded, one of my colleague spoil the mushroom and she get scolded by the employer...Turnover is very high in the place I work in, employees get fired almost all the time.” Based on Din’s description, this suggests that her employer took advantage of their physical vulnerability as women and verbally insulted them in the form of scolding. It is highly likely that the employer might find female employees easier to scold than male employees. This is because as a female, the appearance is relatively weaker than a male, which makes the employer more daring to verbally insult the female employee.

These examples show the existence of physical vulnerability experienced by Laotian migrant women in feminized work sectors, especially for domestic work and services work. This further suggests that Laotian migrant women in these work sectors are more liable to physical exploitation by their employers, and even sexual harassment. In terms of sexual harassment, this could be made even more possible by the physical appearance of Laotian migrant women who work in services, particularly those who work in the entertainment industry, such as karaoke and bar venues. Laotian migrant women who work in these services sector and whom are deemed good-looking by their male customers may be subject to provocative statements made to them about their outward appearances. In harsher situations, they may even be subject to cat-calling and sexual harassment through words and actions from the male customers in the karaoke and bar venues. The only exception is Faa, who is working in a garment factory, who shared that there is no difference in her employer’s treatment of her male and female colleagues in the same factory as her, as “males and females in the factory do the same job as me, both females and males get treated equally in the factory.”

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical vulnerability of these Laotian migrant women are protracted and heightened as some of them face unemployment and are stuck in Thailand as the international borders between Laos and Thailand have already closed. For instance, the Straits Times (2020) reported that “ten of thousands of jobless migrant workers from Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia have been scrambling to leave Thailand since shops and retail outlets were shuttered in its major cities to contain the coronavirus outbreak, raising fears of a fresh wave of cross-border infections.” For the Laotian migrant women in services work, they are

most affected as businesses in the services sector have lesser customers, as a result, employers need lesser labour and lay off more workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.2 Indicator of Vulnerability: Economic

Based on my main cases of Laotian migrant women, they travelled in two ways, either via the official route or via the unofficial route. For the Laotian migrant women that travelled via the official route, they brought their passports and identification cards and chose a type of transport that were proper and legal. As for the Laotian migrant women that travelled through the unofficial route, they did not bring any form of identification and chose a type of transport that were not proper and legal. This often involved some need for coordination between the Laos side and the Thai side. This also meant that some of them crossed to Thailand by illegal means, such as on a private boat or private van. The group of Laotian migrant women who crossed to Thailand by proper means and with proper documentation, also had done their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) contracts before entering Thailand. There is also another group of Laotian migrant women that first came to Thailand via the unofficial route, but was converted to official means after they had their employment in Thailand confirmed. This is usually done by their employer in Thailand. This raises the legal aspects of work permit and the consequences related to their economic vulnerability, due to a lack of labour protection of the Thai law especially for the group of Laotian migrant women that arrived Thailand through the unofficial route. The combination of the way that Laotian migrant women entered Thailand and the feminized work sectors that they work in shape the degree of economic vulnerability that they experienced while living and working in Thailand. This is especially so for Laotian migrant women who came to Thailand via the unofficial route and did not get MOU contract done and hence subjected to a lack of labour protection.

Laotian migrant women faced economic vulnerability in specific work sectors. In terms of the work sector and the type of work that attributes to their economic vulnerability, domestic work adds to the most vulnerability in terms of economic vulnerability. This is because domestic work is mainly done in the private

sphere and is hidden from the public eye. As a result, work exploitation is most prevalent in domestic work. For instance, Bee shared that “my documents get confiscated (passport and ID) away by my boss in my new job (as a maid).” This was done after she changed her job from commercial services work to domestic work. The fact that her employer withholds her legal documents is telling of her economic vulnerability and difficulty in changing job, should she face any work issues with her new employer. This is also telling of the lack of the trust on the part of the new employer. This is also related to the work conditions that she is subjected to while working in Thailand. This is despite the fact that she is under a two-year MOU contract. She also mentioned that in the MOU contract, it stated only pay and no other benefits. This further suggests that even for Laotian migrant women who have had MOU contracts, they are also subjected to economic vulnerability.

Some of the Laotian migrant women who have had MOU contracts and entered Thailand via the official route received wages that are at least minimum or slight above minimum wage in terms of the work sector and location of work. At the moment, the average minimum wage per day is 300 Baht in Thailand. Some of the Laotian migrant women even earn slightly more than the minimum wage, as they also receive overtime pay. For instance, some of the Laotian migrant women can earn from 9,000 B a month up to 12,000 B a month with MOU contract. However, some of the Laotian migrant women who came here through the unofficial way and did not apply for MOU contracts, received below-minimum wages, such as 200 Baht per day. For this group of Laotian migrant women whom received below-minimum wages, they are usually paid by the day. This is seen from the Laotian migrant women working in agriculture, and is also applicable to their Laotian female colleagues. For instance Dok and Foy working in agriculture with no MOU contracts are paid between 6,000 B to 8,000 Baht a month. In addition, they do not get fixed monthly pays, as their type of work is seasonal. These variations in their wages are directly related to their type of work that they are doing and also the method of entering Thailand, whether via an official route or unofficial route. There are also variations in the frequency that the wages are paid to them, from monthly, to weekly, and even daily. The only positive result was that almost all of

the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed mentioned that their employers had timely wage payment for them.

For some of the Laotian migrant women, their work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that some of the Laotian migrant women had lesser work to do during this time or even became unemployed, as the COVID-19 pandemic had affected many businesses. For the Laotian migrant women who had lesser work to do, they received lesser pay. As for the Laotian migrant women who became unemployed, some of them had to go back to Laos while the rest remained stuck in Thailand as the international borders had already closed. This shows another aspect of economic vulnerability experienced by the Laotian migrant women in Thailand, due to the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in a lockdown of international borders and travel, which further increases their economic vulnerability in the form of reduced wages or even a lack of wages. For instance, Dok who is working as a farmer in rural Thailand, shared that “I am not working at the moment, because of the economic slowdown, employers don’t have money to pay me.”

Laotian migrant women also faced economic vulnerability in the form of a lack of work benefits, such as medical and healthcare. In terms of the Laotian migrant women’s medical and health benefits, there are differences in experiences of these Laotian migrant women. Majority of the Laotian migrant women also shared that their employers did not take care of them when they fell sick. They had to rely mainly on themselves whenever they fell sick. This applies to Laotian migrant women in all the work sectors. For instance, the group of Laotian migrant women who have MOU contracts had basic healthcare and medical benefits. However, this is not the case for every Laotian migrant women that have MOU contracts. For some of them with MOU contracts, they also did not have any form of healthcare or welfare benefits and had to mainly rely on themselves in the event that they fell sick. This is despite the fact that they have secured and signed two-year MOU contracts and they claimed that they understood the terms and conditions of the contract. However, when probed further on what they understood from the MOU contracts, they said that they understood that they could not change employer within two years, in the case of a two-year MOU contract, and they only knew about the amount of pay they would get from the job and their work duties.

Hence, this shows that even for the two-year MOU contracts, it did not state any form of work benefit for them. As for the group of Laotian migrant women who came to Thailand without any MOU contracts, they had to rely on themselves fully whenever they fell sick. For instance, Din shared that “if I fall sick, I need to go and see doctor myself, if I am not feeling well, I go and see the doctor myself.” In addition, for most of these Laotian migrant women, their employer also does not take them to regular health checkups. Hence, for these Laotian migrant women, they would not know if their health is in good shape or not during work. A few exceptional cases was that they relied on their Thai partners’ healthcare scheme and healthcare benefits from it. For instance, Pan shared that she only needed to pay 2,700 B yearly and the insurance will pay for hospital bills, and this insurance was made possible as her husband is Thai. However, it is important to note that these Laotian migrant women with Thai husbands still face economic vulnerability, as they still do not have any form of healthcare benefits from their employers. In terms of compensation for overtime pay, majority of the Laotian migrant women in all the work sectors denied this work benefit for them.

For the small number of Laotian migrant women who were pregnant at the time of interview, they faced more economic vulnerability, as they lacked maternity and childcare benefits, on top of a lack of medical benefits. In addition, their employers did not provide for them any maternity or childcare leave in taking care of their newborn nor any form of support for delivery of their child. This leaves them in a more vulnerable position as compared to the Laotian migrant women who were single and did not have any children. For instance, Faa, who was working in a garment factory in Nakhon Pathom and in her second trimester at the time of interview, said that “I don’t know if my employer will give me benefits when I give birth, I will depend on my employer to send me to the hospital.” This connotes a sense of uncertainty on her part on whom she could approach for help and support on issues surrounding childbirth and childcare. This is despite the fact that her Laotian partner was also working together with her in the factory. This suggests that there is uncertainty in terms of maternity issues such as delivery of the child and this adds to the physical vulnerability of the pregnant Laotian migrant woman working in the garment factory. Worst of all, for one of the pregnant Laotian migrant women

faced more dire consequences of economic vulnerability when she was also in her second trimester at the time of interview. Ton, who worked at an office canteen in Bangkok, shared that her boss dismissed her when she changed to work as a waitress in a café in Bangkok. Hence, she was dismissed due to her pregnancy while working in Thailand. Ton said that “my boss don’t want me, because I am pregnant, cannot do anything.” This emphasizes the economic vulnerability as a pregnant migrant woman from Laos. The only consolidation is that Ton is able to still depend on her Thai partner for living expenses and healthcare for her baby. These examples show that Laotian migrant women are liable to a lack of work benefits such as adequate number of leave and healthcare benefits, especially for those who are pregnant. In addition, the lack of MOU work contract relates to a lack of labour protection of Thai law for this group of Laotian migrant women who came to Thailand through the unofficial route, and hence subject to inadequate rest days, lack of healthcare and medical benefits from employers, and below-minimum wages.

3.3.3 Indicator of Vulnerability: Social

Based on my research findings, majority of the Laotian migrant women had access to social networks from their friends and family members in Laos which further helped them get jobs in Thailand. This applies to Laotian migrant women in almost all the four work sectors. Majority of the Laotian migrant women said that they were recommended jobs in Thailand from their Laotian female friends or their female siblings who had travelled to Thailand to work first and formed connections in Thailand. This suggests the importance of the role of Laotian migrant women’s social networks in increasing their job opportunities in Thailand, and thereby reducing their social vulnerability, as their social networks actually helped them secure employment in Thailand. A small number of the Laotian migrant women also mentioned that their previous employer helped introduce and recommend them to their current job in Thailand. This also shows that for the Laotian migrant women who had worked in Thailand before, they had already formed their own social networks and connections in Thailand that could enable them to secure other jobs in Thailand. Only one of the Laotian migrant women, Bua, who relied on connections of a middleman to secure a job in agriculture in Thailand. This further shows that the issue of social networks and

connections in Thailand may help these Laotian migrant women be more capable in terms of finding further resources and connections.

It is important to note that having social networks and connections in Thailand based on their Laotian relatives and friends living in Thailand are not sufficient to reduce their social vulnerability. This is because for Laotian migrant women in agriculture and domestic work that had social networks and connections in Thailand, they are still vulnerable as they did not enter Thailand via the official route and they did not do any MOU work contracts. Hence, despite the fact that they had social connections and networks in Thailand, they were unable to gain access to social welfare and rights such as medical and healthcare. For instance, Dok, who has worked as a farmer in Thailand for the past 20 years, said that “I don’t contact anyone because I don’t have any visa, I am illegal immigrant here.” This shows that she is cautious of her illegal status in Thailand, and further shows her hesitation in exercising her social networks and resources based on the fact that she did not enter Thailand via the official route and did not have any proper work contract or permit.

There is also a similar pattern where majority of these Laotian migrant women’s social networks in Thailand are very small and concentrated around their own local community and friends. Majority of the Laotian migrant women mentioned that they mainly had Laotian relatives and friends in Thailand, but not Thai friends. For instance, Mai shared that “I don’t know much people here...I don’t have Thai friends.” Only some of them mentioned that they knew some Thai people from the village that they stayed in. For instance, Bee said that “the people I know are from different families but not from the same place in Laos, but I just happen to know them, I don’t know any other people besides my friends.” Similarly, Bua shared that “I don’t know anybody else, I have relatives in Thailand, but I don’t contact my relatives apart from for work.” Pan also said that “the community is very small, so I don’t know any people.” This shows that their social networks in Thailand are very small and concentrated around their own local community and friends. This emphasizes the degree of social vulnerability, as the circle of networks and resources that they have are very limited to their own Laotian community, which as Pan said, is very small.

In addition, their lack of social networks of Thai people highlights their social vulnerability, especially if they needed help on issues related to Thai labour laws. For instance, Mai shared that “I don’t know much people here...I don’t have any Thai friends.” This suggests that although Laotian migrant women have their social networks to rely on when living and working in Thailand, it is worth noting that their social networks are very small and community-based. The aspect of social vulnerability increases especially when some of the Laotian migrant women mentioned that their Laotian friends and relatives had already gone back to Laos due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, it is worth noting the implication of their Laotian friends and relatives returning back to Laos, and leaving this group of Laotian migrant women behind during the COVID-19 pandemic. This also means that for some of the Laotian migrant women, the resources that they are able to derive from their social networks may have changed drastically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This would in turn have negative implications in the event that they needed help and support while being stuck in Thailand due to the closing of international borders between Laos and Thailand, and especially for the Laotian migrant women who are still working in Thailand even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The only exception is that for a few of the Laotian migrant women, their social networks expanded a bit when they met their Thai partners here while living and working in Thailand. For instance, Pan shared that “I met my husband while working on the farm together.” In addition, Foy said that “I am staying with my husband and children here in Thailand...I am depending on his relatives, I stay with my husband’s family.” In the case of these Laotian migrant women who have Thai partners while living and working in Thailand, most of them raised their own children in Thailand. This can be seen from the example of Ton, who was pregnant at the time of interview, shared that she would raise her own family up in Thailand and not in Laos. Ton added that “I want my child to grow up in Thailand. I don’t want to go back (to Laos) because my child will be Thai already, I don’t want to go back anymore.” This suggests that for Ton, she may want to provide more social resources and a better life for her children here in Thailand, rather than in Laos. This relates back to the point on social vulnerability, in that she finds it a need to settle down in Thailand instead of

Laos, and especially so for her child. By having a child that has Thai nationality, Ton could have better social support and status as mother of a Thai child.

In addition, majority of the Laotian migrant women shared that they did not have any knowledge of social organizations that help migrant workers on issues related to work or immigration. This relates back to their social vulnerability as migrant women, especially when employers put them in less favourable work conditions or withhold their wage payments for a small number of the Laotian migrant women. For instance, only one of the Laotian migrant women mentioned that they knew the Laos embassy in Thailand. However, she did not have anything that she needed help on, so she did not keep in further contact with the people at the Laos embassy in Thailand. This further relates to social vulnerability due to a lack of wide social networks and connections in Thailand. This is especially so if they need to deal with work-related issues and labour law issues in the context of Thailand.

3.3.4 Indicator of Vulnerability: Cultural

From my research findings, it is common that majority of the Laotian migrant women recognizes their family roles and responsibilities in Laos, such as taking care of children or elderly in Laos. However, upon leaving Laos to work in Thailand, it can be seen that most of family roles and responsibilities such as caring role for elderly and children cannot be continued to be done by these Laotian migrant women. As a result, the caring role is being passed on to other family members in Laos, most commonly onto their mothers. Hence, they could not continue their duties and responsibilities as a woman in their families. This suggests that these Laotian migrant women face a certain degree of cultural vulnerability when they leave Laos to work in Thailand, as they could not afford to continue taking care of the children and elderly back home in Laos physically. The common solution is that they would remit money back home and their mothers in Laos would receive the remittance and use the remittance to continue taking care of their children or elderly on their behalf. However, this does not resolve the issue of cultural vulnerability faced by the Laotian migrant women who cannot continue their roles and responsibilities as women and mothers in their families.

Another aspect of cultural vulnerability relates to whether their family members could also come and work in Thailand, so that their family members could be kept close to them when these Laotian migrant women come to work in Thailand. However, majority of the Laotian migrant women mentioned that the rest of their family members, such as their siblings, could not follow them to come and work in Thailand as they had to take care of farming responsibilities back home in Laos. For instance, Mai shared that “my family is happy that I am independent, but my siblings are not coming to Thailand, because my siblings need to work on the farm.” For the majority of Laotian migrant women whose family members cannot relocate to Thailand for work, these Laotian migrant women often could not exercise their duties as a sister, mother, and daughter in their families.

Another aspect of cultural vulnerability relates to the difference in cultural expectations between the roles and responsibilities of men and women in Laotian society, which is an extension of the patriarchal system in Laotian families and patrimonial system in Laotian society. For instance, Laotian men are not expected to do household chores, but Laotian women are expected to do household chores on top of helping out at their family farms. In addition, Laotian men could do lesser work than Laotian women for the household and family. This can be seen through the example of Faa, who was heavily pregnant at the time of interview and working in a garment factory in Nakhon Pathom. Faa shared that her Laotian husband was also working at the same factory. However, based on an interview with her employer Sii, who shared that Faa is much more hardworking than her husband at work. For example, Faa would normally start work at 7am or 8am latest, while Faa’s husband would only start work at 11am or close to noon.

Hence, for the group of Laotian migrant women who are married with children, the sense of independence from their husbands is also a form of cultural vulnerability faced by these married Laotian migrant women. Not only do these Laotian migrant women need to take care of their family in Laos, they also need to take care of their family in Thailand. In the case of Faa’s pregnancy with her first child, she said that “I will depend on my employer to send me to the hospital.” This is despite the fact that she has her Laotian husband who is also working together with her at the same garment factory. Faa also did not talk about relying on her husband for

support on her pregnancy and childbirth at all. This further suggests a sense of cultural vulnerability faced by these married Laotian migrant women, due to a lack of support on her husband and the culturally more demanding roles and expectations of women in Laotian society. Not only does this reflect the patriarchal system in Laotian families and patrimonial system in Laotian society, it also shows clearly that power is mainly concentrated and exercised among men in the family household and within Laotian society. This type of structure in the family and society further reflects Laotian women playing a passive and subservient role in the family and in the society. These examples further suggest the limited abilities of Laotian migrant women in fully performing their roles and responsibilities expected of them in Laotian culture as a woman, mother and a daughter, especially in the context of a patriarchal system in Laotian families and patrimonial system in Laotian society.

3.4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I discussed based on the analysis of my research findings, how the feminization process affected Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility, and how the conditions of the feminization process contributed to various aspects of Laotian migrant women's vulnerability. I also discussed the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it further contributed to various aspects of Laotian migrant women's vulnerability.

To conclude this chapter, I argue that Laotian migrant women working in the four work sectors, namely agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory, experience the feminization process of transnational migration to a large degree. Hence, the feminization process of transnational migration affects Laotian migrant women's cross-border mobility to a large extent, as seen from the four indicators of feminization, namely income, work, family, and social networks and resources. Laotian migrant women who come to work in Thailand are mainly disadvantaged due to their positionality as women and as migrants. They experience gender discrimination and gender inequality in the workplace as a female migrant from Laos. In addition, they experience gender discrimination and gender inequality in their family and society as a Laotian woman, which is further protracted as they are physically apart from their families in Laos.

I further argue that Laotian migrant women working in the four work sectors experience various aspects of vulnerability, namely physical vulnerability, economic vulnerability, social vulnerability, and cultural vulnerability. However, the extent that Laotian migrant women face these aspects of vulnerability depends very much on their positionality as women and also depends on the nature of their work in the four sectors of agricultural work, domestic work, services work, and garment factory work. The extent of these aspects of vulnerability faced by Laotian migrant women also depends on their migrant status, the way that they entered Thailand, and the type of documentation they brought with them to Thailand. Hence, these Laotian migrant women are made most vulnerable if they are illegal workers, entered Thailand via unofficial channels, and did not bring any form of documentation with them. The vulnerability of Laotian migrant women is further protracted and heightened if they work in feminized work sectors that are also informal work sectors, such as domestic work that is in the domestic setting and private sphere, and agricultural work which is mainly seasonal and informal work.

Hence, I conclude that the group of Laotian migrant women who are the most vulnerable among the four sectors are Laotian migrant women in the agriculture and domestic work sectors. This is because the nature of work in these work sectors encourage and place Laotian migrant women at great risks in entering Thailand via unofficial routes illegally with a lack of proper documentation. This is further supported by my research findings of the extent of vulnerability faced by Laotian migrant women in the agriculture and domestic work sectors. For instance, majority of the Laotian migrant women doing agricultural work in Mukdahan province are illegal workers without any form of documentation such as identification card and passport. The nature of agricultural work is seasonal, which also means that employers do not have work for them throughout the year. Hence, there is no incentive or purpose for employers nor these Laotian migrant women to go through formal documentation to get work permits and MOU contracts. These Laotian migrant women also reached Thailand via unofficial channels, namely by boat from Savannakhet province in Laos to Mukdahan province in Thailand. Hence, these Laotian migrant women doing agricultural work are subject to below-minimum daily wages, such as 200 baht a day, with a lack of proper medical and social welfare

benefits for them during their period of work. In addition, these Laotian migrant women barely know anyone in Thailand due to the nature of their work which is seasonal. All these relate to their physical, economic, and social vulnerability as Laotian migrant women in agricultural work who are also illegal workers, do not have proper documentation, and are not protected by labour laws.

As for the Laotian migrant women who are domestic workers in Bangkok city, they are also illegal workers who entered Thailand via unofficial channels. However, in the case of Bee, she managed to convert her illegal status to legal status by obtaining a visa and a two-year MOU work contract right after she converted her work from services work to domestic work. Despite this fact, Bee's employer withholds her documentation such as her passport. On the other hand, Gek did not have a valid work permit as her visa was already expired, in addition to her illegal entry into Thailand with a lack of documentation. Gek remained unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of interview. Hence, based on my research findings of Laotian migrant women in domestic work, I conclude that Laotian migrant women in domestic work are also vulnerable, due largely to the nature of their work which is in the domestic setting and private sphere, and also attributing to their illegal status as migrants and the incorrect type of documentation that they hold.

CHAPTER FOUR – LAOTIAN MIGRANT WOMEN AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT

In this chapter, I answer my third research question on the gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women and the role of stakeholders on Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment, with the use of gender indicators.

4.1 Stages of Gender Empowerment of Laotian Migrant Women in the Four Work Sectors

This section first examines the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors, namely, agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory. This section next analyzes the role of stakeholders, particularly how stakeholders could aid in the gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women in these four work sectors. This section uses supporting evidence from my supplementary cases of key informants, which include employers and migrant network leaders of Laotian migrant women, academics and experts knowledgeable in the field of migration, and representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, in addition to evidence from my main cases of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the feminist gendered perspective is an important lens to use in analyzing my research findings of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors. In analyzing the feminization of transnational migration and cross-border mobility using feminist gendered lens, the imbalanced power relations between men and women in Laotian society are highlighted and is used as a focal point of discussion in this research. This provides important contextual background and information in analyzing how these Laotian migrant women cope with conditions of feminization and various aspects of vulnerability in feminized work sectors in Thailand, within the dominant patriarchal family structure in Laos and the patrimonial system in Laotian society.

Gender empowerment is used as a concept to ascertain whether Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors are empowered as women despite working in

feminized work sectors, such as whether they are able to gain control over their own present living circumstances and external working environment. Hence, I operationalize the concept of gender empowerment using the following gender indicators as discussed in Chapter 2, in examining the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors. The following gender indicators are adapted from UNHCR (2001)'s Longwe gender empowerment framework and re-adapted to the context of my research as progressive stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand:

Access

Laotian migrant women's access to resources and rights

Self-Awareness

Laotian migrant women's self-awareness of gender discrimination and the implication of gender discrimination in their access to resources and rights

Mobilization

Laotian migrant women's ability to mobilize resources and rights, by increasing others' self-awareness on the implication of gender discrimination in their access to resources and rights

Control

Laotian migrant women's ability to control their external environment and dictate their circumstances after being able to mobilize resources and rights

The concept of gender empowerment is further conceptualized as a process and solution for Laotian migrant women to regain control over their work conditions, living circumstances, and external environments, in a bid to rebalance the power relations between men and women in Laotian society. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are different methods of empowerment in achieving different types of empowerment. Hence, the role of stakeholders is analyzed in how they could aid these Laotian migrant women in achieving higher and more progressive stages of gender empowerment.

Based on my research findings, I argue that Laotian migrant women in all the four work sectors have very limited stages of gender empowerment. In relation to the

above gender indicators, Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors have limited access to resources and rights, due to limited self-awareness of gender discrimination and implications of gender discrimination on their access to resources and rights. Hence, these Laotian migrant women do not have the same access to resources and rights on the same level as the men. In addition, these Laotian migrant women are not able to mobilize resources and rights, and gain control of their external environment. Hence, this reflects gender inequality in their circumstances as Laotian migrant women and gender discrimination due to their positionality as women in Laotian society.

I further argue that it is thus imperative for stakeholders, such as representatives of civil society, NGOs and international organizations, employers, academics, experts, and migrant network leaders to step in and help further empower these Laotian migrant women, so that they could gain higher and more progressive stages of empowerment, such as being able to mobilize their resources and rights, gain control of their external environment, and dictate their own circumstances. In doing so, these stakeholders could help enhance the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women working in the four work sectors.

Several key findings emerged from my structured qualitative interviews with Laotian migrant women across the diversity of work sectors and geographical locales that they work in and come from. These key findings address the very limited stages of gender empowerment that Laotian migrant women working in the four work sectors have. The main themes that arose from this third research objective and question of the gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women and the role of stakeholders on Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment are that the conditions of feminization and vulnerability translate to Laotian migrant women's limited stages of gender empowerment, and this is made more protracted when they are working in feminized and informal work sectors, such as agriculture and domestic work. It is thus important for stakeholders to improve Laotian migrant women's limited stages of gender empowerment in the four work sectors through their different roles and capabilities.

4.1.1 Domestic Work Sector

Profile and Demographics

To recap, as mentioned in Chapter 3 on the cases of Laotian migrant women who were domestic workers in Bangkok city, Bee has been working as a domestic worker for only a few months, whereas Gek fell out of employment from her domestic work at the time of interview. Besides their Thai partners, Bee and Gek know some Laotian relatives and friends based in Thailand. Both of them have similar dreams in wanting to have a complete family and having enough money to live a comfortable life for themselves and their family.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Access

Laotian migrant women in domestic work have limited access to resources and rights as migrant women. Although Bee and Gek are new to their work as domestic workers, they were able to gain access to economic resources and rights as workers. Both Bee and Gek shared that they were able to earn at least three times more in Thailand than Laos, where they could only earn little money from farming in Laos. For instance, Bee shared that sometimes she could only earn 20 baht a day from small work in Laos. Due to their increased earnings in Thailand, they were also able to remit a significant amount of money back to Laos for their family members, especially their children in Laos. Both Bee and Gek shared that they had one rest day per weekend, although rest days were not necessarily granted on public holidays. Compared to the job opportunities in Laos, there were much more job opportunities in Thailand for these Laotian migrant women in domestic work.

However, Bee and Gek could not gain access to other resources and rights as migrant women. In terms of social resources and legal rights, these Laotian migrant women in domestic work are left to fend for themselves whenever they fall sick. For instance, they would need to take unpaid leave whenever they fell sick, their employers would not pay for their medical fees, and they would need to visit the clinic themselves or get over-the-counter medication from the pharmacy. This also means that their employers do not take them to health checkups for domestic workers. In addition, due to the nature of domestic work, this group of Laotian migrant women

are often segregated to do work individually. This means that most of the time, they are living and working alone. This has negative implications on their social networks and support from social organizations, especially if they experience abuse or exploitation from their employers in the domestic setting and private sphere. In addition, Laotian migrant women in domestic work are more vulnerable to a lack of legal protection and less abiding of labour laws by their employers, due to the nature of domestic work that is in the private sphere. This vulnerability attributed due to the nature of domestic work worsens when these Laotian migrant women enter Thailand via unofficial channels, with incorrect visa types or documentation, and a lack of a valid work permit and MOU contract. For instance, Gek shared that “If I fall sick on a working day, I will need to take unpaid leave and take care of myself like see doctor on my own...I came to Thailand not the right way, I did not do any work permit and no work agreement/contract, and my visa is already expired”. Gek’s situation is made worse when she quit her job as a domestic worker, leaving her unemployed and stuck in Thailand in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Self-Awareness

Laotian migrant women doing domestic work have limited self-awareness of gender discrimination and its implication in their access to social resources and legal rights. First, due to the nature of domestic work, these Laotian migrant women often work in silos and do not realize that almost all women whom are domestic workers are often doing very tedious and tiring work. Although these Laotian migrant women are able to feel the side effects of physical work as domestic workers, they do not question why employers normally only hire women to do domestic work. The physical side effects of domestic work are highlighted especially when these Laotian migrant women lack mainly access to social resources and legal rights, particularly on healthcare and social protection. For instance, Bee kept complaining about the physical strenuous work that she is not used to as a woman and the uncertainty that she felt about medical and healthcare, such as whether her employer would help support her should she fall sick one day. Second, the mindset of these Laotian migrant women in domestic work shows that they are oblivious to gender discrimination in Laotian family and society, which further shows how they can be stuck in the

domestic work sector for a relatively long time. For instance, Bee shared that “women try to find rich husbands...my dream is to have a family that is stable and nice, I am looking for a husband who can take care of me very well.” This shows that Bee accepts the gender inequality in Laotian society, where men are above women in terms of power and capability, and are better positioned to take care of women as men in Laotian society. This indirectly translates to acceptance of gender discrimination in her work as a domestic worker, where Bee needs to do physical hard work and also remit money back to her family in Laos in order to take care of her family from afar.

In addition, this group of Laotian migrant women does not have self-awareness of the patriarchal family system in Laos, and by extension, the patrimonial system in Laotian society that favour men more than women. This is shown in the way that they talk about the house and land ownership in Laos. For instance, Bee knows that the head of the village is male and shared that “my mother is the owner of the land, my father is the owner of the house but he passed on, there’s no normality, it depends on who wants to be the head of the house, my father passed on 8 years ago that is why my mother is taking over.” This suggests that she is not aware of the male superiority that is perpetuated in Laotian society based on lineage and inheritance of the house and land, and also the concentration of power among men in the villages.

Due to a severe lack of self-awareness of gender discrimination and the implication in their access to resources and rights, this group of Laotian migrant women in domestic work are not able to mobilize resources and rights and also are unable to increase others’ self-awareness on the implication of gender discrimination in their access to resources and rights. In addition, they are rendered helpless in gaining control of their external environment and unable to dictate their circumstances as domestic workers.

4.1.2 Agricultural Work Sector

Profile and Demographics

To recap, as mentioned in Chapter 3 on the cases of Laotian migrant women doing agricultural work in Mukdahan province, Pan, Dok, and Foy, have been doing permanent agricultural work throughout the year for more than 10 years and have

settled down in Thailand with their Thai partners and children and doing the same farming work for more than 10 years. As for Bua, she does seasonal agricultural work in Mukdahan and it is the first time she worked in Thailand. Bua returned back to Laos after a month of finishing her seasonal agricultural work. However, all of them chose to come to work in Thailand. For the three women who have Thai partners, they also know other Thai people living near them but it is limited, while Bua only know Laotian relatives based in Thailand. All of them have slightly different dreams. For instance, Bua wishes to work in a better job that is more stable, Dok and Foy wish to have more knowledge, whereas Pan wishes for her son to have a better future.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Access

Laotian migrant women in agriculture have very limited access to resources and rights. However, they are able to gain access to economic resources and rights as workers, although it is still limited. For instance, they are able to get at least two times more pay by doing agricultural work in Thailand as compared to in Laos. This translates to more savings and their ability to provide more remittances to their family members in Laos or feed their children who are similarly based in Thailand like them. However, in other economic aspects, this group of Laotian migrant women does not stand to gain in terms of rest days and the stability of having job opportunities to do throughout the year. This is due to the nature of agricultural work that is seasonal, and thus for this group of Laotian migrant women, they are bound to have a few months that they do not have any agricultural work to do. For instance, Pan said that “I am not working at the moment... I do my work for the whole day, there’s no fixed hours, it depends on the workload, it’s not all year round that I have work to do.” This suggests that for these Laotian migrant women, they are more susceptible to seasonal unemployment and instability in job opportunities. In addition, these Laotian migrant women also do not have a guaranteed number of rest days, as the amount of rest time that they are able to get also depends very much on the progress of the agricultural work at that point in time. This also suggests that this group of Laotian migrant women contribute long working hours for their work and are more likely to experience inadequate rest during their seasonal employment. For some of the Laotian

migrant women, they are able to get overtime pay but it is also dependent on the amount and quality of crops or agricultural produce they have done.

Laotian migrant women in agriculture have very limited access to social resources and legal rights. For this group of Laotian migrant women in agriculture, they have very limited access to social resources, especially in terms of healthcare, maternity, and childcare benefits. All of their employers do not provide them with any access to medical or healthcare benefits, as the nature of work is mainly seasonal and not fixed, hence employers do not really see the need to provide them with medical or healthcare benefits. This is because the employers of these Laotian migrant women in agriculture only provide them with their pay and no other benefits. However, some of the employers mentioned that in the event that the women really fell sick during work, they would take care of them by providing them with medicine bought from the pharmacy. In more serious medical cases however, the employer would send the worker back to Laos and settle their transportation fees for them.

The only situation that these Laotian migrant women are able to access to healthcare, maternity and childcare benefits, is when they are married to Thai men and can access healthcare benefits as a family member of their Thai husbands. In addition, for this group of Laotian migrant women in agriculture, they lack social welfare and protection, as they have very limited social networks and are often limited to their own community in the village. This also results in their lack of knowledge of social organizations. These Laotian migrant women also lack skills training by their employers, except Dok, who shared that her employer sent her to learn how to make detergent, besides doing agricultural work.

On legal rights, this group of Laotian migrant women in agriculture also lack legal protection and knowledge of labour laws. In addition, majority of them entered Thailand via unofficial channels, mainly by boat from Laos to Thailand. This also means that for majority of these Laotian migrant women, they are illegal and do not have any valid work permit and visa documentation. Most of the time, they also do not have their own identification documents with them. This further suggests that they lack access to social resources and legal rights, which further highlights the vulnerability of this group, especially when they are illegal and are not bounded by any work contract.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Self-Awareness

For these Laotian migrant women working in agriculture, they have some degree of self-awareness of gender discrimination. Majority of these Laotian migrant women recognize the gendered work segregation in Laos, in the sense that Laotian men and women have different work roles and responsibilities in Laos, despite both genders doing agricultural work. For instance, Pan shared that “Males usually do hard work while women don’t do so much of the hard work...village head is a man, owner of the land or house is usually the man”. In addition, majority of these Laotian migrant women in agriculture notice the dominant leadership of men as head of the village in Laos. All of the Laotian migrant women acknowledge that the village heads are only men, and also recognize the superior positionality of men in Laotian society. For instance, Dok said that “Both male and female do farming but different roles in farming...village head is a male...males are the owner of the land...women are not treated as well as men”. However, they are unsure about the lineage and inheritance of home ownership, and whether it is patrimonial in Laotian society. This shows that although they are aware of the gender discrimination that is a result of the patrimonial system in Laotian culture and patriarchal family structure in Laos, it does not mean that they will mobilize their resources and rights and increasing others’ self-awareness on gender discrimination and gender inequality in their circumstances.

For the Laotian migrant women in agriculture, despite the fact that they have some degree of self-awareness on gender discrimination, they do not think enough about the implications of gender discrimination and how it affect their access to social resources and legal rights. This further shows why and how these Laotian migrant women failed to mobilize their resources and rights. This is seen clearly based on their lack of willingness to take up leadership as women. For instance, Pan said that “it is a pain to be a village head, so I don’t want to be one”, while Dok said that “I don’t want to be a leader, it is easier for men to do it”. Foy also echoed Dok in stating clearly that she is not keen on any leadership role as women. This suggests that for these Laotian migrant women in agriculture, they are not able to mobilize their resources and rights, although they have a certain degree of self-awareness of their resources and rights. In addition, they are rendered helpless in gaining control of their

external environment and unable to dictate their circumstances as agricultural workers.

4.1.3 Services Work Sector

Profile and Demographics

To recap, as mentioned in Chapter 3 on the cases of Laotian migrant women doing services work in Bangkok city. For instance, at the time of interview, Mai was selling Thai desserts at a floating market for two years, whereas Din was serving food at a restaurant for less than a year, before becoming unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rak was selling clothes at a market for a year, and Ton was serving coffee at a café for a few months before becoming unemployed from her pregnancy situation. All of them chose to come to work in Thailand, but only Ton is settled down in Thailand with her Thai partner. Majority of these Laotian migrant women mentioned that they only knew Laotian friends and relatives based in Thailand, and they also have similar dreams in wanting to have a better and more established job as their career for their own independence.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Access

For the Laotian migrant women in services, they are able to gain access to more resources and rights, especially for economic resources. In terms of economic resources, this group of Laotian migrant women has more income and in turn has more remittance and savings than the other groups of Laotian migrant women. For instance, Mai said that “I want to take the money and bring back to Laos and build house for my father”. The more income, remittance, and savings that this group of Laotian migrant women has are also related to the more job opportunities they have due to the variety of work in this particular work sector. Majority of the Laotian migrant women have also at least a day of rest a week. In terms of legal rights, this group of Laotian migrant women has legal protection for the labour laws, mainly because majority of them have obtained the correct two-year work permit and visa before coming to work in Thailand. It is only Din who did not obtain the correct visa and came to Thailand via a tourist visa.

However, this group of Laotian migrant women lacks access to social resources and legal rights. This is especially so for medical and healthcare, where most of the time, whenever they fall sick, they would need to pay for medical fees themselves. In addition, for this group of Laotian migrant women, they also lack awareness of social organizations, and hence lack support in terms of social welfare and protection. Moreover, for this group of Laotian migrant women, they have limited social networks for their local community based here in Thailand. This suggests the limitation they face should they need to seek help for legal issues in the context of Thailand. In addition, their employers do not provide them with any skills training for their jobs. For instance, Mai shared that she had initial misunderstanding about her work duties as a dessert seller, and this could be due to the fact that her employer did not brief her properly on her work duties.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Self-Awareness

Laotian migrant women working in services have a certain degree of self-awareness of gender discrimination and the implication in their access to social resources and legal rights. First, majority of these Laotian migrant women in services recognize the gendered work segregation in Laotian society, where men do more physical labour than women, and women are mainly doing work in the domestic setting, such as household chores. Second, majority of these Laotian migrant women also realize that power is largely concentrated among the men in Laotian society, as they recognize that all village heads in Laos are men. Last, Laotian migrant women in services work also recognize that with gender discrimination, there is also the presence of gender inequality, particularly on the topic of educational opportunities. For instance, Rak shared that “My brother studied engineering, money is more spent on males than on females”. Hence, Rak commented on how in a large family, economic resources are mainly spread and invested more on sons than daughters in the family.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Mobilize

Although Laotian migrant women working in services have a certain degree of self-awareness of gender discrimination, they fail to act upon this self-awareness of

gender discrimination and implication on their access to social resources and legal rights. Hence, these Laotian migrant women do not mobilize their resources and rights as they accept the situation of gender discrimination in the context of their Laotian society, which indirectly further subject themselves to gender discrimination. This also means that their acceptance of the situation of gender discrimination in Laotian society allows it to perpetuate and reproduce such gender discrimination and inequality in Laotian society. For instance, Din shared that “It is not possible to be somebody big in the village because there is a barrier (of social hierarchy)”. Similarly, Rak shared that “My village head is a male, females cannot be village head...I don’t want to be any village head or leader, don’t want to waste time, still have to do what other people say”. This suggests a self-internalization of the inner struggles as a woman on the power differentiation that Laotian men have over Laotian women.

However, some of these Laotian migrant women in services work have differing views and perspectives on the role of women in Laotian society. For instance, Rak said that “I think it’s not necessary for females to get married, but in my family we need to get married, because it is a tradition and culture, I don’t want to get married because it is a waste, I am afraid of additional jobs like household jobs after getting married”. This is echoed by both Mai and Din who said respectively that it is not necessary for women to get married. Mai shared that she want to be independent as a woman and pursue further education or work on her career, while Din shared that it would be difficult to pursue things that one wants if they are married, as they would need to take up additional duties such as household chores.

4.1.4 Garment Factory Work Sector

Profile and Demographics

To recap, as mentioned in Chapter 3 on the case of 1 Laotian migrant woman doing garment factory work in Nakhon Pathom province, Faa helped her family with farming work before coming to work in Thailand. At the time of interview, Faa has been working in a garment factory in Nakhon Pathom province in Thailand for three years. Faa chose to come to work in Thailand, together with her younger sister and husband from Laos, who are also working in the same garment factory as Faa.

Besides her family members living and working in Thailand with her, Faa only knows other Laotian people from the same hometown as her who are also based in Thailand. Faa has a dream of having a house of her own and starting her own food business.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Access

For the Laotian migrant women in garment factory, due to research constraints, I was only able to interview one Laotian migrant woman as a representative of this group. Laotian migrant women in garment factory have limited access to social resources and legal rights, although they have access to economic resources. For instance, Faa shared that her work is quite flexible and very much depends on how much work she wants to produce for the employer and she will be paid accordingly for the amount and quality of her work. This translates to more income earned in the garment factory, and also translates to more remittances for her family members in Laos. Faa said that “I think I get paid a lot, the more job I do, the more I get paid...I used to send 10,000 baht every month...I will send the money to my mother, she use the money for daily necessities, my mother use the money to build the house in Laos”. This also translates to overtime pay in the sense that they are still paid beyond the usual working hours as the nature of garment factory work is determined by the amount and quality of clothing produced.

However, Laotian migrant women have limited access to social resources and legal rights. Laotian migrant women in garment factory are particularly vulnerable when they are pregnant, as this relates to uncertainty in terms of social welfare and support by the employer for healthcare and maternity benefits. For instance, Faa described her uncertainty on whether her employer would help support her for childbirth, by saying that “I don’t get any health benefits from the employer...I don’t know if my employer will give me benefits when I give birth, I will depend on my employer to send me to the hospital”. In addition, Laotian migrant women in this work sector lack social protection, welfare, and support as they lack knowledge on reaching out to social organizations. However, the skills training that they receive are also related to their current job in the garment factory, which may further translate to better job opportunities for them after the garment factory work.

In terms of legal rights, it is unclear how this group of Laotian migrant women is protected in terms of labour laws, as it is not confirmed if Faa had obtained a two-year work permit before working at the garment factory in Nakhon Pathom province. Faa's employer, Sii, shared that Faa initially came to Thailand via the unofficial channel, and only recently got registered under the MOU contract. Faa shared that she did not go through the proper visa process, but she never had any immigration issues. Faa was heavily pregnant and also not sure if she would receive any help or support from her employer on maternity and childcare, although her employer did bring her to maternity checkups.

Stage of Gender Empowerment - Self-Awareness

Laotian migrant women in garment factory have a lack of self-awareness on gender discrimination and the implication of gender discrimination on their limited access to social resources and legal rights. This is because for Faa who was pregnant while working at the garment factory, shared that the male Thai employer treated males and females equally in the factory. Similarly, she also shared that there is no gendered work segregation in Laos, as "males and females do the same thing because most of them are farmers". This suggests that she is not aware on the gender discrimination and gender inequality that exist between men and women in Laotian society. A part of this reason may be due to the nature of the garment factory work, where the employer rewards the workers based on their performance at work in terms of the amount and quality of clothing produced, with little work differentiation between the male and female Laotian employees. This is despite the fact that Faa recognizes the patriarchal system in the family in Laos, where land and house ownership mainly belonged to the men in the household. For instance, Faa shared that "My father is the owner of the house, my father is the owner of the land...most of the village heads are male...the land is passed on from generation to generation, that is why it always belongs to the men." Nevertheless, it is important to take into consideration the research limitation and constraint of having only one case for this work sector, which may not most accurately portray the situation faced by Laotian migrant women in garment factories.

4.1.5 Summary of Main Cases of Laotian Migrant Women

In summary, majority of these Laotian migrant women come from poorer and more rural regions of Laos, such as Pakse and Savannakhet, as compared to other regions such as Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang in Laos. Some of these rural regions of Laos where these Laotian migrant women came from are also border provinces between Laos and Thailand. It can also be seen that majority of these Laotian migrant women marry early and have their own family in their 20s. Majority of these Laotian migrant women also come from large families in Laos who do mainly farming work in Laos, with limited education for themselves. It can be inferred that for the family composition in Laos, there are more youth than elderly in their homes. Due to the large family size in Laos, it can also be inferred that majority of the Laotian migrant women do not have access to much education as a result of limited resources to spare for everyone in the family. This is shown by how majority of the Laotian migrant women whom I interviewed are educated up to primary school level, with a few who completed secondary school, and a very small number who are university graduates. This could be related to the cultural context of Laos, as Laotian women have lesser educational opportunities as compared to Laotian men. Parents would more likely give educational opportunities to their sons than daughters, which could be further related to the patriarchal familial context in Laos. On the other hand, in the case of Laotian men, it is also not uncommon to see some older male siblings who do not complete their education so that they could find jobs to contribute to the household and feed their family members, especially for their younger siblings in Laos.

4.1.6 Summary of Laotian Migrant Women's Gender Empowerment Across the Four Work Sectors

Stages of Gender Empowerment/Work Sector	Domestic Work	Agricultural Work	Services Work	Garment Factory Work
Access	Yes, but limited	Yes, but limited	Yes	Yes, but

				limited
Self-Awareness	Yes, but limited	Yes, but limited	Yes, some	No, lack
Mobilize	No, lack	No, unable	No, unable	No, lack
Control	No, lack	No, lack	No, lack	No, lack

Table 3: Overview of Laotian Migrant Women's Stages of Gender Empowerment Across Work Sectors

Table 3 shows an overview of the stages of gender empowerment that Laotian migrant women have across the four work sectors of domestic work, agricultural work, services work, and garment factory work. I have analyzed the stages of gender empowerment that Laotian migrant women in each work sector have or lack, and further compared the differences in the stages of gender empowerment among Laotian migrant women across the four work sectors. In summary, it can be seen that Laotian migrant women in services have the most progressive stages of gender empowerment, followed by Laotian migrant women in agriculture, domestic work, and garment factory. However, it is important to consider that for the case of the garment factory work sector, it is only one case which may lead to over-generalization of Laotian migrant women's circumstances in the garment factory. Laotian migrant women in services are nevertheless, much more empowered than Laotian migrant women in agriculture and domestic work. This is because Laotian migrant women in services have more access to resources and rights, and also have a certain degree of self-awareness of the implication of gender discrimination on their access to resources and rights. On the other hand, Laotian migrant women in agriculture and domestic work have limited access to resources and rights, as well as limited self-awareness of the implication of gender discrimination on their access to resources and rights.

4.2 Role of Stakeholders in Laotian Migrant Women's Gender Empowerment

In this section, I use supplementary cases of my key informants to assess the role of stakeholders, which include representatives of NGOs, civil society and

international organizations, migrant network leaders, employers, as well as academics and experts knowledgeable in the field of migration, and what they could possibly do to enhance gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women to reach more progressive stages of gender empowerment, based on gender indicators of access, self-awareness, mobilize, and control.

4.2.1 Stakeholders' Profile, Demographics, and Roles

First, I elaborate on the profile and demographics of my supplementary cases of key informants which I also refer to as stakeholders, which include the four categories of stakeholders as follows: employers, migrant network leaders, academics and experts, and representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations. Next, I analyze what the roles of these stakeholders are in enhancing gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women in the four work sections, and how they contribute to the stages of gender empowerment based on gender indicators.

4.2.2 Employers

In the case of employers, I interviewed employers of Laotian migrant women in the agriculture and garment factory work sector, Cha and Sii respectively. Cha has been hiring Laotian migrant workers to help her work on her bell pepper farm for the past 13 years. Cha has hired Laotian male workers before but currently she has been hiring only Laotian female workers, as based on her own experience, they are more obedient and more hardworking than Laotian male workers. Cha has known one of her Laotian female workers for at least 10 years as they come from the same village and helped Cha recommend other Laotian female workers to her. Due to the nature of work that is seasonal and the fact that Cha only requires labour for her field for one month, she did not do any work permit or visa for her Laotian migrant workers. However, she helped the migrant workers cross the borders from Laos to Thailand by boat, and took care of their food and lodging during the seasonal time that they worked for her. During the exceptional times when her workers fell sick during work, Cha would buy medicine from the pharmacy for them. Sii has been hiring Laotian migrant workers to help him produce clothing at his garment factory for the past six years. Sii has hired both male and female Laotian migrant workers for his factory, and

he has mentioned that the Laotian female workers are more hardworking than the Laotian male worker in producing quantity of clothing for the factory diligently. Sii mentioned that his Laotian migrant workers initially came to Thailand via unofficial channels. However, in recent years, Sii has helped them convert to legal workers by going through the MOU process with the basic healthcare and medical benefits accorded to them. However, there is no written work contract on contractual pay for his Laotian migrant workers.

Based on my interviews with these employers, it is clear that employers play an important role in empowering the Laotian migrant women by converting them from illegal status to legal status. In the case of Cha, she said that for her workers, “they don’t have visa...no insurance for them, the way they are coming in is illegal...they have to live cautiously because otherwise the police will catch them, so cannot go out...it is just temporary work so they don’t need a passport, they just sneak in...everybody in the village knows it is illegal, but they don’t do anything about it...if they get caught, then we have to bribe the police.” Due to their illegal status, Cha added that for the workers, “when they are sick, I will just go and buy medicine for them to eat...cannot send them to the doctor because they are illegal.” This shows that it is difficult to empower Laotian migrant women, as they would not be able to gain access to resources and rights due to their illegal status.

On the other hand, Sii shared that “last time my workers don’t have MOU, they just come in illegally...we had an agent to smuggle them in, 1 person 10,000 Baht each time.” Sii shared that in recent times, “this government makes it easier to get these foreign workers to come in...last time it is costly to make passport in their own country (Laos), so usually they don’t make the passport, now it is compulsory to make the passports.” This suggests that he had successfully transitioned his migrant workers to shift from being illegal workers to legal workers by registering them on the MOU system. Hence, it is important to legalize the Laotian migrant women, as a precursory step before helping them on their gender empowerment. The importance of converting migrant workers from illegal to legal status is even more so when one of his Laotian migrant workers, Faa, was pregnant at the time of interview. Sii said that “I will bring Faa to go and see the doctor when she is pregnant for checkup...I will pay for Faa’s child delivery, I will bring her to the hospital.” Hence, with the

successful conversion of his workers to legal workers, Faa would be better empowered as a working woman and as a new mother. This is because being under the MOU system would allow Faa to be better taken care of in terms of maternity and childcare. In this way, employers are more accountable to their workers in terms of healthcare and medical benefits, especially when it concerns pregnant migrant women for maternity and childcare. Not only does the legalization process help Laotian migrant women gain access to rights and resources, it also ensures that employers of Laotian migrant women provide them access to their rights and resources, especially for medical and healthcare services. In this way, employers could help empower them further by improving their stages of empowerment, starting from access to resources and rights, so that they could progress to other stages of empowerment over time, such as self-awareness of gender discrimination and implications in their access to resources and rights, and mobilization of resources and rights.

Employers could further empower Laotian migrant women based on their role in giving them opportunity to learn new skills that are also related to their current work. For instance, Sii mentioned that “I want to give them more knowledge because I have other work for them to do, such as doing printing of clothes design.” This is in addition to his Laotian migrant workers’ work in producing clothing for his garment factory, and also complements the skillsets they use for their work in the garment factory. Hence, this serves as a starting point in improving the gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women, by doing skills training with the migrant women. It is thus important to encourage employers of Laotian migrant women to take up new skills and trainings, by stating that it can be a win-win situation for both employers and employees. Laotian migrant women, after learning new skills, could help their employers in other aspects of work, which could be very much related to the new skills that they learnt. In doing so, employers play a supporting role by helping these Laotian migrant women progress to other stages of empowerment, such as mobilizing their rights and resources, through learning new skills and learning how to be self-sufficient for themselves.

4.2.3 Migrant Network Leaders

In the case of migrant network leaders, I interviewed close Laotian friends of Laotian migrant women in the services and domestic work sector, Lae and Dao respectively. Lae is born in Thailand to Laotian parents and knows the Laotian migrant women from her previous work. Lae continues meeting them frequently and builds on their relationship as friends, even after she changed her job. Lae is close friends with Mai, a Laotian migrant woman working in the services work sector. Lae shared that most of her Laotian friends were under MOU contracts. In addition, her Laotian friends have agency that take care of their healthcare and social welfare, except Mai who was not under agency as she got the job on her own. Lae also mentioned that she would help her Laotian friends if they needed help, such as borrowing money, and helping them understand in Laotian language from Thai language on employment matters. Dao is also born in Thailand to Laotian parents and knows the Laotian migrant women from her previous work. Dao also continues maintaining contact with them on the phone, as some of her Laotian friends changed job and are no longer working at the same workplace. Dao is close friends with Bee and Ton, who was working in domestic work and services work respectively at the time of interview. Dao shared that her Laotian friends had health insurance but different types of health insurance as they are all under different employers.

Based on my interviews with these migrant network leaders, it is clear that they play a few important roles for the Laotian migrant women. First, migrant network leaders play a role of facilitator and executor of Laotian migrant women's social networks. For instance, Lae shared that "I help my friends by giving them advice on things like visa and other stuff...I will help the rest of my friends and give advice to my Lao friends on what to do, such as when they have to contact Thai government agencies...I will advise them to go and contact the local district office...I lent some of them money to carry on and for them to continue living here". By doing so, they play an advisory role and provide additional knowledge and information about issues that they face here, such as legal issues. This also means that migrant network leaders play another role in providing information in a clear way that Laotian migrant are able to understand. This suggests that migrant network leaders have the capacity to serve as a bridge or mediator between migrant workers, relevant social

organizations and local Thai government authorities, to further help and support these Laotian migrant women when they face any work or labour issues during their time living and working in Thailand. In doing so, migrant network leaders could help empower Laotian migrant women by providing sufficient information on labour laws and rights, so that they could be more self-aware on gender discrimination and the implication on their access to rights and resources as women. Migrant network leaders could further empower Laotian migrant women by acting as bridge and mediator between migrant workers and relevant social organizations and local Thai authorities, and in turn mobilize them to act to increase others' self-awareness on gender discrimination and its implication on their access to rights and resources as women.

Second, migrant network leaders play a role of emotional support for the Laotian migrant women who are living and working abroad and migrant network leaders also play a definitive role in the Laotian migrant women's social communities. For instance, Dao said that "the reason why we are close to each other is we see each other at the workplace everyday...we are quite closely-knitted so we help each other financially, emotional support...I still meet them from time to time." This further suggests that migrant network leaders help support Laotian migrant women emotionally on top of being part of their social networks. In playing these two definitive roles for Laotian migrant women, migrant network leaders could help empower Laotian migrant women to be more self-aware in terms of gender discrimination and implication in their access to rights and resources, as well as mobilizing them and enabling them to gain control of their external environment and circumstances as migrant women.

4.2.4 Academics and Experts

In the case of academics and experts, I interviewed a professor from Ubon Ratchathani University, Jum, and a researcher from Institute of Asian Studies in Chulalongkorn University, Lub. Jum shared about his first-hand experience on Laotian migrant workers based in Ubon Ratchathani province which is his hometown in Thailand, as well as based on his research and teaching on Mekong and development work. Jum observed that the number of Laotian migrant workers in Ubon has increased, due to more factories built in Ubon in recent years. Based on his

research and teaching on Mekong and development work, there were five examples of Laotian migrant women in services work sector based in Ubon, and majority are legal workers with valid work permit. The interesting point is that initially, majority of these Laotian migrant women are illegal workers when they first arrived to Thailand. Since then, four of them they have converted to work permit holders through the MOU contracts, with the exception of one who remains to be illegal worker. Jum thus recognized the core problem of illegal migrant workers from Laos, and how their illegal status affects their access to healthcare and medical, especially for female migrant workers from Laos. Jum also recognized the gender difference between Laotian male migrants and Laotian female migrants working in the same job, where Laotian male migrants would be more active and confident in public as compared to the Laotian female migrants. Lub shared about her first-hand research experience on migrant women from Laos, particularly how there are more Laotian women working in services and domestic work sectors. Lub also shared about the phenomenon how some of these Laotian women marry Thai men as a means to settle down permanently in Thailand by starting their own family in Thailand. This is also a means for these Laotian migrant women to have a different lifestyle and better standard of living as compared to Laos. The problem that comes along with this is that most of the Laotian women whom she encountered during her research who are married to Thai men are also at risk of illegal overstay, as they do not see the need to renew their visa and they are also able to 'blend' easily into the Thai community based on the language and cultural similarity between Laos and Thailand. Another issue that Lub recognized based on her first-hand research experience is on the issue of human trafficking of young Laotian women, mainly done by employers and brokers, and especially for young Laotian women who are encouraged to take up work in the services sector.

Based on interviews regarding academics and experts' research experiences on Laotian migrant women, it is clear that academics and experts understand the importance of educating Laotian migrant women to acquire legal status when they first enter Thailand to work, so that they can gain access to more rights and resources as a legal female migrant worker from Laos. For instance, Jum shared about how the legal workers were able to access healthcare benefits and social welfare while the illegal workers were unable to do so. This suggests his emphasis on the importance of

the status of Laotian migrant workers when they come to work in Thailand, and also supported the importance to convert their status from illegal to legal, should they arrive in Thailand with the wrong type of documentation. Jum added that “I think it is easier to change from illegal to legal now, because the Thai government opens to allow employers to do work permit for the illegal”. This suggests that the current legal structure of the migration system in Thailand has become more favourable for migrant workers to come in via the official channel and with the correct type of documentation. This shows that the first step needed to improve the working and living conditions of Laotian migrant women in Thailand is to ensure that they are legalized, with proper work permit and documentation. The legalization process is thus a precursory step in enhancing Laotian migrant women’s stages of gender empowerment. Hence, academics and experts play an important role in educating Laotian migrant women on the importance of being legal workers.

The next important role of academics and experts in enhancing the gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women is to ensure that the Laotian migrant women are aware and understand their labour rights, as the next step to enhance their gender empowerment. The second factor to improve Laotian migrant women’s stage of gender empowerment is to educate them on relevant knowledge and information, such as labour laws and rights, in order to improve their self-awareness to their rights and resources. Hence, this emphasizes the importance of academics and experts to educate Laotian migrant women by making them aware of their labour rights as the next step to empower these Laotian migrant women. For instance, Lub shared that “mostly they do not understand the labour rights, there are cases that they may not get the salary according to the contract, and also they don’t know where to go for help...it is important to let them know about their labour rights...to have more awareness of labour rights”. Hence, it is important to educate Laotian migrant women by providing them relevant knowledge and information even before they start work. For instance, Jum suggested that it is important to conduct orientations for the Laotian migrant women. Jum added that it is important to propose implementation of migration and legal policies. Jum and Lub also acknowledged that the main issue was the Laotian migrant women’s lack of awareness of their labour rights, and as a consequence, they are often helpless when they face labour-related issues and challenges with their

employers. For instance, Lub shared that “mostly they are mostly they do not understand the labour rights, there are cases that they may not get the salary according to the contract, and also they don’t know where to go for help”. Similarly, Jum said that “I think they are not clear about the labour rights, some of them say they want to have the rest day, but the employer does not allow them for the rest day, so they don’t know they need to have 1 rest day for the week, they don’t know about this right”. Lub suggested government representatives, employers, brokers, embassy, and civil society to collaborate together to increase Laotian migrant women’s knowledge of their work, channels of assistance for social protection or raising complaints, to increase their understanding of work contract through translators, and all these information and knowledge could be done in the form of a training and orientation for these migrant workers.

The next step to further empower Laotian migrant women is to ensure that their employers also know about labour rights of their migrant workers, so that they could follow and implement these labour rights accordingly. Hence, employers could be educated through academics and experts on labour rights and laws. For instance, Lub said that “the employers should also be aware, they rely on workers and vice versa...employers should also take care of their workers, employers should also be aware, how to take care of the workers, what are the labour laws and protection.” Similarly, Jum said that it is necessary to “explain to the employers on health benefits for their legal workers...if both employer and worker know about the rights, I think they will change some condition. I think it is still better than they don’t know.” It is thus crucial that both Laotian migrant women and their employers should know and have full understanding of the labour rights, so that the employers of the Laotian migrant women would be able to enable their employees to access to their rights and resources as a first step in gender empowerment. Besides educating Laotian migrant women and improving self-awareness of their rights and resources, it is also necessary to educate the employers of Laotian migrant women too. This is to ensure that the employers also know the labour rights well, so that they can follow and implement these labour rights accordingly. This serves as the next step to further empower Laotian migrant women, by helping employers know the importance of labour rights and laws. It is thus crucial that both Laotian migrant women and their employers

know and have better understanding of labour laws and rights, so that the employers of Laotian migrant women would be able to enable them to gain access and be more self-aware of their rights and resources. This also serves as a next step in mobilizing Laotian migrant women to be proactive, after both employers and employees gain self-awareness of their rights and resources. This shows that beyond educating Laotian migrant women about their labour rights and ensuring that they understand all their labour rights well, it is also important to educate Laotian migrant women's employers about their employees' labour rights too. This was similar to Jum's suggestion of conducting orientations for the Laotian migrant women as a way to disseminate information regarding labour laws and protection.

4.2.5 NGOs, Civil Society, and International Organizations

In the case of NGOs and civil society, I interviewed representatives of Homenet, The Fellowship Foundation for Child and Youth Development in Nongkhai province in Thailand, and a Lao activist. Rai, representative of Homenet, shared with me the current initiatives that Homenet was doing for domestic workers from Thailand's neighbouring countries, namely Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Rai mentioned some initiatives such as workshops to provide important information to domestic workers, a mobile application for domestic workers to use, and providing opportunities for domestic workers to form their own migrant community group and lead its activities. Rit, representative of The Fellowship Foundation for Child and Youth Development, shared with me the NGO work that they do in helping underprivileged children and also his experience as a social worker and helping children and families along the borders between Laos and Thailand. Rit shared with me his personal experiences of Laotian migrant women and their families in Nongkhai province, and also the human trafficking cases of Laotian migrant women whom he encountered. Naa, a Lao activist, shared with me personal stories of Laotian migrant women whom she was close with in her Laotian community, and the struggles that they experienced while working in Thailand, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which further exacerbated their struggles living and working in Thailand as informal migrant workers who did not obtain the correct form of work documentation.

In the case of international organizations, I interviewed representatives of international organizations that worked in the field of labour migration in Thailand. Representatives of international organizations shared their current project initiatives on empowering migrant women mainly from Thailand's neighbouring countries, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, and their collaboration with representatives of another international organization that works on labour migration issues. These representatives also shared initiatives that they would want to continue implementing, in encouraging migrant women to be better empowered and also encourage empowerment from the perspectives of employers.

Based on my interview findings with representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations as a whole, I posit that Laotian migrant women lacked relevant knowledge and information about their labour rights and laws, which contributes to their lack of self-awareness of rights and resources. They acknowledged that the main issue was the lack of awareness of labour rights due to either lack of knowledge, insufficient information, or misunderstood information. For instance, Rai, shared that through her NGO work with migrant workers in domestic work under Homenet, she said that "we found out that they know nothing, they don't know their right as a domestic worker, regulation no. 14 say that domestic worker have to have at least 1 day off per week, but when we go to work with the people in Chiangrai, they have to work every day, and if on Sunday they want to go and see the doctor and they ask employer, employer did not pay for them when they stop work for a day, they have a right to stop work, they didn't know they have a right to have a day off once a week at least one day". Similarly, Lao activist, Naa, shared that "I don't think they know anything about labour rights...and if want to contact any NGO, I also don't know which NGO help about labour issue." Naa also acknowledged the employers' treatment of the Laotian migrant women as a contributing factor to limiting Laotian migrant women's exercising of labour rights, as some of these Laotian migrant women, although aware of labour rights, are unable to mobilize and exercise their rights. Similarly, representatives of international organizations shared that "in terms of rights, awareness and knowledge, there is not enough information, there are a lot of networks working with migrant group but they are not accessible to these information, access (to information) is the challenge".

In resolving the issue of a lack of awareness, exercising, and mobilizing labour rights for Laotian migrant women, representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations have shared real-life examples of the events and initiatives they were currently doing at the time of interview, in bridging the gap between employers' and employees' knowledge of labour rights and self-awareness. For instance, Rai, representative of Homenet, shared that they conducted workshops, seminars, and producing a mobile app for sharing and transmitting knowledge on labour rights and issues that can be understood by the domestic migrant workers. The workshops and seminars conducted by Homenet enabled domestic migrant workers to better understand labour laws and protection. It could be seen that some of the domestic migrant workers put their new knowledge to good use, as Rai shared an example of how a domestic migrant worker sought help from Homenet to go through a court procedure, as the employer denied the domestic migrant worker the basic pay. This example shows how migrant workers are more empowered by knowledge and information given to them by NGOs, civil society, and international organizations. In addition, Homenet also tried reaching out to the employers of the domestic migrant workers to encourage them to give their workers time off in the evenings to attend the seminars.

The third factor to improve Laotian migrant women's level of gender empowerment in terms of mobilizing rights and resources and gaining control of their external environment is to enable them to learn additional skills in the form of workshops and trainings. Some NGO and civil society representatives shared their current initiatives in encouraging migrant workers to gain new or additional skills to their current type of work. For instance, Rai, representative of Homenet, shared about how Homenet organized different types of workshops to help domestic migrant workers perform better in their jobs and better protect themselves as migrant women. In the case of Homenet, the workshops focused on skills training related to domestic work and also teaching them to be more careful about their physical safety and health as women. The seminars focused on sharing legal information and knowledge that can be understood more easily by these domestic workers. Another example relates to representatives of international organizations, whom were doing initiatives to help migrant women from Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia obtain skills training, so that

they could be better empowered as women. However, they also recognized that in doing so, it is necessary to involve other related stakeholders, such as improving employers' awareness of the role of female migrant workers so that they could be allowed to attend skills training relevant to their current work sector. Representatives of international organizations added that it is important "to empower them through economic development opportunities, this is where we work with civil society organizations (CSOs) to organize trainings on financial literacy, negotiation skills, communication skills, business startup skills, if they can have increased opportunities of academy, this will also increase their social mobility." This shows that new knowledge and information from such skills training could help improve the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women, by enabling them to mobilize their rights and resources and gain control of their external environment and circumstances as migrant women.

In addition, representatives of international organizations also recognized that in their efforts of promoting women empowerment of migrant women, it is also important to involve the employers of migrant women. This is so that the social stigma of women performing lesser than men at certain jobs could be lifted and also serves as a starting point to educate employers about gender empowerment of migrant women and for employers to recognize the worth of migrant women. After employers gain understanding and are more gender-sensitive, it would be easier for migrant women to attend trainings and workshops to improve their current skills or take up new skills. This would be a great stepping stone to improve their levels of gender empowerment.

The last factor to improve Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment levels is to connect them to relevant NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, so that they could have the relevant networks and resources to mobilize their rights and resources, as well as gain control of their external environment and circumstances. For instance, Rai, representative of Homenet, shared how Homenet leveraged on migrant network leaders to spread information and knowledge to the other migrant domestic workers, as well as to build trust among the migrant domestic workers and NGOs. Rai gave an example of how migrant network leaders were depended to help convince migrant domestic workers to attend Homenet's seminars,

despite them being harassed and threatened by brokers not to attend the seminars. This further suggests the importance of the role of migrant network leaders to connect migrant workers to relevant civil society organizations that serve to help them in any situation. This would further enable them to mobilize their rights and resources, and gain control of their external environment after being in contact with relevant NGOs and civil society and empowered by these organizations.

4.3 Stakeholders and their Role on Laotian Migrant Women's Gender Empowerment

It is thus important for multi-level collaboration between different parties of concern, such as employers, government representatives, as well as representatives of NGOs, civil society and international organizations, so that Laotian migrant women could fully realize the first two steps of gender empowerment, which is access and self-awareness, before moving on to the next levels of gender empowerment, which is mobilize and control. In doing so, related stakeholders need to be proactive and be involved in this process too, particularly employers of Laotian migrant women.

I agree with academics and experts knowledgeable in the field of migration that it is necessary for multiple levels of collaboration between different stakeholders involved, such as representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, government and embassy representatives, as well as employers and brokers. In doing so, this could align the level and depth of information regarding labour rights, gender rights, and human rights of Laotian migrant women who come to work in Thailand. This could also serve as a stepping stone to improve the levels of gender empowerment of all Laotian migrant women in any work sectors.

Next, it is important for multi-level collaboration between different parties of concern, such as employers, government representatives, and representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, so that Laotian migrant women could fully realize the first two stages of gender empowerment, which is access and self-awareness, before moving on to the next stages of gender empowerment, which is mobilize and control. For instance, Lub suggested governmental representatives, employers, brokers, embassy, and civil society to collaborate together to increase Laotian migrant women's knowledge of their work, channels of assistance for social

protection or raising complaints, to increase their understanding of work contract through translators, and all these information and knowledge could be done in the form of a training and orientation for these migrant workers.

I agree with the academics and experts whom I interviewed that it is necessary for multiple levels of collaboration between different stakeholders involved, such as representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, government and embassy representatives, as well as employers and brokers. In doing so, this could align the level and depth of information regarding labour rights, gender rights, and human rights of Laotian migrant women who come to work in Thailand. This could serve as a stepping stone to improve the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women. I emphasize that related stakeholders need to be proactive and be involved in this process too, particularly employers of Laotian migrant women. In addition, Laotian migrant women's network leaders could also be involved as intermediary between representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, employers, and Laotian migrant women themselves.

4.4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I discussed based on analysis of my research findings, the stages of Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment and the role of stakeholders on Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment.

To conclude this chapter, I argue that Laotian migrant women working in the four work sectors of agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory, show different levels of gender empowerment, based on the four gender indicators: access, self-awareness, mobilize, and control. I conclude that the Laotian migrant women in the informal and feminized work sectors, namely domestic work and agriculture, have the lowest levels of gender empowerment as compared to the Laotian migrant women working in services and garment factory. This is because the Laotian migrant women in domestic work and agriculture have the most limited access to resources and rights, due to a lack of self-awareness of gender discrimination, resulting in a lack of access to resources and rights as migrant workers and as women. This is exacerbated by the nature of their work as informal and feminized, on top of their illegal entry into

Thailand with the incorrect type of legal documentation or the lack of any proper legal documentation.

I further argue that it is important for stakeholders, namely employers, academics and experts, and migrant network leaders, to step in and help empower these Laotian migrant women. In this way, through multiple stakeholder collaboration, Laotian migrant women's levels of gender empowerment could be enhanced from levels of access and self-awareness of rights and resources, to mobilize and control of rights and resources. It is thus important for stakeholders to improve Laotian migrant women's limited levels of gender empowerment, and aid in their further cross-border mobility.

This reinforces my argument that it is important for representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations to step in and help further empower these Laotian migrant women, so that they could mobilize their resources and rights, gain control of their external environment, and be able to dictate their circumstances. In doing so, NGOs, civil society, and international organizations could help enhance the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors. By extension, NGOs, civil society, and international organizations would also help aid in Laotian migrant women's further cross-border mobility. It is thus important for NGOs, civil society, and international organizations to improve Laotian migrant women's limited stages of gender empowerment in the four work sectors and help in their further cross-border mobility.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I conclude with a theoretical discussion of my research questions, and how my research analysis and findings answer my research questions, and also how my research analysis and findings agree or disagree with my literature review as discussed in Chapter 2. Next, I provide my recommendations based on my research analysis and findings, with suggestions on what are the further possible areas of research for this research topic.

5.1 Conclusion and Theoretical Discussion

5.1.1 Feminization, Vulnerability, and Gender Empowerment

To conclude, I reinstate my research questions together with my research findings and analysis. First, I examined the feminization process in the cross-border mobility of Laotian migrant women. I conclude that Laotian migrant women who travel from Laos to Thailand are often subject to the feminization process of transnational migration based on the four indicators of income, work, family, and social networks, in the process of searching for better economic opportunities in Thailand. This can be seen by my cases of Laotian migrant women working in feminized work sectors in Thailand, namely in agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory. Second, I investigated the aspects of vulnerability of Laotian migrant women vis-à-vis the feminization process. I conclude that Laotian migrant women become more vulnerable when they work in feminized work sectors that are also informal work, such as agricultural work that is seasonal and domestic work that is in the private settings. Their vulnerability heightens when they come in as illegal workers through unofficial work channels and with incorrect types of legal documentation. Third, I examined the stages of Laotian migrant women's gender empowerment and the role of stakeholders on gender empowerment. I conclude that Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors of agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory have different degrees of gender empowerment. Majority of these Laotian migrant women have limited levels of gender empowerment, in terms of access and self-awareness. Only a small number of these

Laotian migrant women are able to reach a higher stage of gender empowerment, which is mobilize. However, they are also limited to fully exercise the higher stages of gender empowerment. This is due to their circumstances as migrant women, and they are further affected by the COVID-19 pandemic during their time working in Thailand.

From my research findings and analysis, I have some contributions to the theoretical discussion on migrant women in Southeast Asia, with my focus on Laotian migrant women in Thailand. My theoretical discussion is based on the works of Sassen (2000), Yeoh (2016), Elmhirst (2013), Aida (2006), UNHCR (2001), Mandal (2013), Peet and Hartwick (2015), and Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003, 2006).

Sassen (2000) discussed that Laotian migrant women are subject to the feminization process of transnational migration as they leave Laos for alternative employment opportunities in Thailand. Yeoh (2016) elaborated that Laotian migrant women mainly find themselves in informal and feminized work sectors, such as caregiving and domestic work. To add to the literature review, I discovered the presence of Laotian migrant women in the formal work sectors, such as services work sector and garment factory work sector, besides the presence of Laotian migrant women in informal work sectors such as domestic work. Hence, this shows a research gap in the feminization process of transnational migration faced by Laotian migrant women in these formal work sectors that are not considered as informal work sectors.

From my research findings, it is also true that the type of jobs that Laotian migrant women work in Thailand are mainly low-skilled and low-paid, especially when they work in feminized and informal work sectors such as in agriculture or domestic work. As for the Laotian migrant women who worked in services and garment factory, some of them managed to get minimum wages for their type of work. It is also realized that there are no wage differentials between Laotian migrant men and women for the same type of work in Thailand, although there are wage differentials between Laotian migrant men and women in Laos.

I further contribute to the literature review by stating that Laotian migrant women consider other factors, not just economic factors, in migrating from Laos to Thailand. For instance, the group of matured Laotian migrant women working in agriculture have stayed in Thailand for a long time as they met their Thai partners,

settled down in Thailand and had their own family. This relates to the social and family factors that Sassen (2000) and Yeoh (2016) did not refer to, as Sassen (2000) mainly talked about the role of economic circuits and the relation to women's burden in earning incomes, while Yeoh (2016) mainly discussed the macro factors of transnational migration, where the factors are also mostly economic factors. In addition, the family factors are made more profound by the Laotian migrant women who remitted money back to their families in Laos, which also suggest that the main motivations for Laotian migrant women working in Thailand are not just economic.

Elmhirst (2013) discussed vulnerability and talked about how the term vulnerability is used in the social sciences approach. Elmhirst (2013) also referenced Mustafa's vulnerability assessment tool in the aspects of material vulnerabilities, institutional vulnerabilities, and attitudinal vulnerabilities. I thus re-assessed the vulnerability assessment tool and analyzed the vulnerability of Laotian migrant women in the four aspects of physical vulnerability, economic vulnerability, social vulnerability, and cultural vulnerability.

I add to the literature review on the conditions of the feminization process and vulnerability. I posit that not only are Laotian migrant women more vulnerable as they are potentially subjected to more labour rights violations than men, they are often stuck in low-skilled and unskilled work and are made more vulnerable when they come in illegally to work in informal and feminized work sectors. In addition, Laotian migrant women are made more vulnerable as they are subject to less economic opportunities due to lesser educational opportunities given to them as compared to Laotian men, which was discussed briefly by Aida (2006). I further posit that lesser educational opportunities rendered to Laotian migrant women denotes the extent of power asymmetry between men and women in Laotian society that has not been discussed and explored as much in academic literature. As a result, they become physically, economically, socially, and culturally vulnerable, due to their positionality as migrant workers and as women.

I further contribute to the literature review that Laotian migrant women in the informal work sectors, such as domestic work and agriculture, experienced stronger degrees of feminization conditions and consequences of feminization, including vulnerability. It is thus important to be aware of the strong relation between

feminization and vulnerability of Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand, as working in feminized work sectors lead to informal work and unofficial channels of entering Thailand, which further leads to their vulnerability as migrant women.

A significant contribution to the literature review on the cultural and linguistic similarity between Laos and Thailand is that this particular attribute could add to Laotian migrant women's vulnerability. However, Aida (2006) mainly discussed the benefits of Laotian migrant workers working in Thailand due to their cultural and language similarities, and did not focus on the potential consequences of such cultural and linguistic similarity. I posit that the cultural and language similarity would enable Laotian migrant women to 'blend' into local culture. However, with the nature of their feminized and informal work, this usually results in them being segregated and limited to their own small communities. Hence, their vulnerability of lack of social protection and vulnerability as women heightens, due to the fact that these Laotian migrant women are able to 'blend' into local culture easily.

A new research finding that has not been discussed in the literature review at all is related to my study conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. From my research findings, it is also apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic situation has made the lives of Laotian migrant women working in Thailand much harder and thus more vulnerable to work dismissal, insecurity of wages, and health issues especially for those Laotian migrant women whom were pregnant at the time of interview.

Peet and Hartwick (2015) and Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003, 2006) discussed about gender empowerment using the feminist lens approach and by looking at the imbalance in power relations between men and women in society. Mandal (2013) analyzed the term gender empowerment with the different types of gender empowerment. The gender empowerment framework by UNHCR (2001) is reassessed in the context of Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand. My research findings contribute to the literature review in that the different stages of gender empowerment are analyzed in relation to the imbalance of power relations between men and women in Laotian society. Not only does it reproduce the dominant patriarchal structure and patrimonial system in Laotian society, it also reinstates the gender discrimination and gender inequality between men and women in Laotian

society. By analyzing the stages of gender empowerment with slight adaptation from UNHCR (2001), it adds to the literature review in stating the importance of analyzing gender empowerment by stages and not just by types, which was discussed more by Mandal (2013).

Another significant research finding that can value-add to the literature review is that there is significant power disparity between men and women in Laotian society, especially in terms of house and land ownership as well as leadership within the village communities in Laos. This research finding contributes to the literature review which did not go in-depth on the power relations between men and women in Laotian society, in relation to the gendered division of labour in Laos, as discussed by Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003, 2006). In terms of the power disparity between men and women in Laotian society, I found out that power concentrates among Laotian men in the community and society, as seen in majority of the cases that the village head are only men, while women cannot be village heads. Power disparity between men and women in Laotian society can also be seen in the family, as Laotian women are often relegated to the private and domestic sphere, while Laotian men are often seen in the public sphere. This further adds to the literature review by Peet and Hartwick (2015) and Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003, 2006) on the gendered and feminist lens approach in analyzing migration trends, by looking at the power asymmetry between Laotian men and women in their societies, in relation to their positionality as Laotian migrant men and women based in Thailand.

My research findings also contribute to the literature review as it reinforces the importance of improving stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women in all the work sectors, through the help and support of multiple stakeholders, namely representatives of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, employers, migrant network leaders, as well as academics and experts. Due to the scarcity of literature on gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women, my research findings contribute significantly to the research gap and also looks at the role of NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, employers, migrant network leaders, as well as academics and experts, in further empowering Laotian migrant women.

5.1.2 Feminization, Vulnerability, and Gender Empowerment in Development Studies

In today's context, there are certain development themes that are clear and used frequently, such as the concept of vulnerability on the study of environmental disaster and risk management and the sustainable livelihoods approach on the study of the environment.

For my research, I aim to create useful and meaningful linkages by connecting concepts. Hence, I seek to fill in the intersection between gender and development in relation to voluntary labour migration with my research, and using the theoretical concepts of feminization, vulnerability, and gender empowerment and relating them to one another. I correlate the feminist approach in explicating the feminization of labour migration for this group of Laotian migrant women who are voluntary migrants to Thailand. I then relate the feminization concept to the vulnerability concept, while retaining the feminist approach and analyzing the implications of feminization and vulnerability in the context of power asymmetry between men and women in Laotian society due to the patriarchal system and patrimonial system in Laos. I further relate the feminization and vulnerability concept to the gender empowerment concept in assessing how the difference in power relations between men and women in Laotian society could be minimized, and how gender empowerment could serve as a breakthrough for Laotian migrant women in Thailand.

In doing so, I am attempting to bridge the gap between gender and development studies and labour migration studies. Hence, my research contributes to the intersectionality between gender and development studies and transnational labour migration, using a gendered perspective and feminist lens. My research also contributes to the importance of a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on gender equality, and focusing on a group of women who are the most vulnerable due to their positionality as migrant women.

Based on existing academic literature, there have been many studies on labour migration, particularly on the feminization of labour migration and its phenomenon in many countries in Asia. There is also the prevalence of academic literature on how migrant women from Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos in work sectors that are more obvious in terms of feminized work, such as entertainment

and karaoke industry. From these academic literature, it is also common to find human trafficking issues alongside such work sectors that are more obviously feminized.

However, there has not been significant academic literature on feminization of labour migration from Thailand's neighbouring countries, particularly on Laos. This may be due to the assumption that Laos and Thailand are culturally similar, and therefore Laotian migrant workers may not face as many problems as Cambodian or Burmese migrant workers. In addition, there has not been much academic literature on how migrant women from Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos working in formal work sectors that are also feminized. My research thus contributes to academic literature by focusing on women from Laos migrating to Thailand and in generic work sectors that are also feminized and informal, such as agriculture, services, and garment factory. My research focuses on the vulnerability that Laotian migrant workers face while working in Thailand, especially Laotian migrant women in the formal work sectors that are less obvious as being feminized. By doing so, I highlight the vulnerability contributed by conditions of feminization that is previously unseen and its implications on the migrant women. This is especially so for Laotian migrant women working in the formal work sectors, such as services and garment factory, who also experience vulnerability contributed by conditions of feminization. I hope that civil society organizations and other stakeholders could recognize the vulnerability that is previously unseen, and make efforts to help and support this particular group of migrant women from Laos. I also hope to emphasize their potential in being empowered as Laotian migrant women. Thereafter, I hope that civil society organizations and other stakeholders could go beyond helping and supporting Laotian migrant women but also other migrant women from Thailand's neighbouring countries, such as Cambodia and Myanmar. This will be further elaborated in my next section on recommendations.

5.2 Recommendations and Future Research

5.2.1 Proposed Recommendations

In this section, I propose recommendations based on my research findings and analysis of Laotian migrant women in the four work sectors of agriculture, domestic work, services, and garment factory.

First, to improve the feminization and vulnerability faced by these Laotian migrant women working in feminized and informal work sectors, it is important for them to realize the benefits of going through official work channels and getting legal documentations, namely the two-year MOU process. This is especially for Laotian migrant women working in seasonal agriculture and domestic work, as they are least incentivized to get a two-year work permit and MOU process due to the nature of agricultural work that is seasonal and domestic work that is in the private settings. To do so, a policy recommendation is needed where the Laotian government needs to work with the Thai government, in having more flexible MOU processes, where it is not limited to a two-year MOU process. For instance, the Laotian government and the Thai government could work together to develop a few MOU systems to suit the various work sectors that all Laotian migrant workers work in. For example, for Laotian migrant workers working in agriculture, the Laotian government and the Thai government could consider signing an MOU where it permits Laotian migrant workers to enter and work in Thailand according to their seasonal work. As for the other work sectors, such as domestic work, services work, and garment factory work, the Laotian government and the Thai government could consider signing an MOU where it permits Laotian migrant workers to enter and work in Thailand for at least a year. After the different MOU processes are signed by both the Laotian and the Thai government, I further propose that there needs to be a follow-up on a tripartite agreement between the Laotian government, Thai government, and employers of Laotian migrant workers. It is important for the Laotian migrant workers to secure the legal documentation and go through the proper and official work channels for all the work sectors. In order for this to be realized successfully, employers of Laotian migrant workers need to have financial help and support from both the Thai government and Laotian government as a result of the tripartite agreement, so that employers would be more incentivized to help the Laotian migrant workers change their illegal status to legal status by going through the MOU processes and getting the

relevant work permits. Civil society organizations and NGOs could also facilitate formal labour arrangements between Laotian migrant women and their employers, so that employers could better arrange for their migrant workers to come in to Thailand via official channels and with MOU visas and work permits. In addition, I hope that the increased labour protection can also be extended to migrant women working in Thailand of all nationalities, and not just for Laotian migrant women.

Second, to improve the social welfare and labour protection of Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand, it is important to consider educating employers of migrant women on gender inequality and gender-based violence in the workplace. This is so that employers of migrant women are more gender-sensitive and aware to the rights of Laotian migrant women in accessing female-related healthcare services, particularly on paid maternity leave and childbirth, as well as childcare and parental leave. In order for this to materialize, it is important to seek help and support from social organizations that advocate for women's rights and migrants' rights, so that representatives from these social organizations could coordinate programmes and events with employers of migrant women to spread awareness on gender discrimination and gender equality. Representatives from these social organizations could work with academics and policymakers to create practical policy recommendations for reduced gender-based violence in the workplace for migrant women, and also practical policy recommendations for employers to practice gender equality in the workplace. NGOs, civil society, and international organizations could also step in and create learning opportunities between employers and migrant women, so as to increase both employers and migrant women's awareness of labour laws and rights. Academics and experts could collaborate with NGOs, civil society, and international organizations to do policy and evidence-based initiatives to support mitigating and eliminating gender discrimination in the workplace, and more initiatives targeted towards migrant women. In addition, migrant network leaders could serve as mediators and bridge between Laotian migrant women, employers, NGOs, civil society, and international organizations. Similarly, I hope that improved social welfare and labour protection can also be extended to migrant women working in Thailand of all nationalities, and not just for Laotian migrant women.

Third, I emphasize the importance of empowering and mobilizing Laotian migrant women through skills training, so that they could have a choice and opportunity to move away from low-skilled jobs in feminized work sectors to higher-skilled jobs in more gender-neutral work sectors. Through skills training, Laotian migrant women will be able to take up additional or new skills that will benefit them as a migrant worker and as a woman. However, this needs to be done in the form of multiple stakeholder collaboration between employers, academics and experts, relevant NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, migrant network leaders, and policymakers. Employers need to be encouraged to send their workers for additional training or new skills training and see it as a form of investment for themselves and their companies. Likewise, migrant workers need to be encouraged to attend trainings to learn new or additional skills that they could value-add to their employers. This win-win situation needs to be highlighted by relevant NGOs, civil society, and international organizations, and migrant network leaders. The multiple stakeholder collaboration is needed to encourage Laotian migrant women to attend new or additional skills training, so that they could be empowered and mobilized as women. This is especially so for Laotian migrant women working in work sectors that are male-dominated, such as in construction and manufacturing sectors. In doing so, there is a chance for them to improve their present circumstances as migrant workers and as women. In addition, I hope that skills training can also be extended to migrant women working in Thailand of all nationalities, and not just for Laotian migrant women.

5.2.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the research limitations faced mainly by research limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I propose the following recommendations for future researchers to further develop and contribute to academic literature on migration and gender.

First, I propose that for future researchers interested in the same research topic, it would be useful to conduct a larger sample size of Laotian migrant women in each work sector. Having a larger sample size of Laotian migrant women in each work sector serves as sufficient data to further analyze the differences in feminization,

vulnerability, and gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women among the different work sectors. For instance, further research could be done on Laotian migrant women in the services work sector, especially on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Laotian migrant women's incomes and livelihoods, such as having lesser customers and thus lesser work to do, in the short term and in the long term. Future researchers could also interview Laotian migrant women working in other work sectors, such as construction and manufacturing work sectors. By doing so, the differences in feminization, vulnerability, and empowerment of Laotian migrant women working across diverse work sectors could be analyzed and studied. I further propose that future researchers could consider interviewing migrant women of other nationalities, such as migrant women from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, so as to further analyze the differences in the degrees of feminization, vulnerability, and gender empowerment among migrant women of different nationalities.

Second, I propose that future researchers could consider interviewing Laotian migrant men in diverse work sectors. This is so that there could be more direct analysis between Laotian migrant men and women in the same work sectors, using gender-based approaches on analyzing feminization, vulnerability, and gender empowerment of migrant men and women from Laos. It is important to include analysis of Laotian migrant men and knowing more about the differences in the circumstances faced by Laotian migrant men and Laotian migrant women living and working in Thailand.

Third, I propose that future researchers could consider doing more in-depth analysis on the stages of gender empowerment of Laotian migrant women, and more on how empowering Laotian migrant women could be done in collaboration with various stakeholders, including migrant network leaders, NGOs, civil society, international organizations, employers, academics, experts, and policymakers. A more in-depth analysis of gender empowerment via gender indicators could also be done for migrant women from different nationalities based in Thailand for the short term and for the long term, and in comparison with migrant men based in Thailand.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guidelines for Laotian Migrant Women

General

How old are you this year?

Which part of Laos are you from?

Which education level did you study until? Where did you study at?

What were you doing for a living in Laos?

Are you married? (if yes, which age did you get married?)

Do you have any kids? (if yes, at which age did you have your first kid, how many kids you have now, and how old are they?)

Are your family members in Laos? How big is your family e.g. any siblings? What are they doing now? How close are you to them?

What about your siblings' education?

How long have you been in Thailand, and is this your first time to Thailand?

Why do you come to Thailand? Was it your choice?

Have you gone back to Laos while working in Thailand? (if yes, how long did you go back for? If no, why?)

Family

When working in Thailand, do you keep in touch with your family? (if yes, how often, and what do you use to keep in touch?)

What does your family think about you coming to Thailand?

Who in your family do you think will come to Thailand like you? Why?

What are your family/village roles and responsibilities in Laos?

If you have children/elderly in Laos, who takes care of them while you are away?

What happens if your children or elderly in Laos need you to be there when you are in Thailand

Gender

In Laos, are there differences between what men and women do for a living? (if yes, describe the differences.)

In your village in Laos, is the village head a man or woman?

Is it more common for men in Laos to become the village head than women?

Is it more common for men in Laos to have their own land and house than women?

For your land and house in Laos, who does it belong to?

Do you want to get married? Do you want to have kids?

Do you think women have to get married? Why?

What is your dream?

Do you think you can become a leader in your village? Do you want to become a leader in your village?

Work

How long have you been working in this job?

How often do you work in the job in Thailand a year?

Who introduced you to the job in Thailand?

Is your employer still giving you work during COVID? (if yes, is there any change in work and pay, and what are the changes? If no, what do you plan to do next, and will you return to Laos?)

How is the covid situation in Laos? Do you and your family members still have work to do?

If you can choose, what job would you like to do?

Does your employer ask you to learn new skills for your work? (if yes, describe what it is.)

Do you think you can get better job after learning new skills/study more? Why?

Do you want to study more/learn new skills? Why?

Does your employer give you a place to stay?

How many hours do you work in a day?

How many rest days do you have per month/How many rest hours do you have per day?

What do you do after working hours? Do you get to go out?

How much are you being paid from your work in Laos?

How much do you earn from your work (per month/per day)?

Do you get paid on time?

Whenever you work more hours than required, how much do they pay you?

Do you send money back home? (if yes, how much each time, are you able to give more money to your family now than when you were in Laos, who receives the money, and what do they think of you giving them the money?)

Any savings? (if yes, how much each time, and will you be able to use the savings to buy a house or land in Laos?)

What does your employer do for you if you fall sick?

How many male colleagues and female colleagues do you have?

If you have male colleagues:

- do they do the same job as you? (if no, describe the difference.)
- do you know how much are they paid? Do you know how much are they paid overtime?
- Do you know how many rest days/hours do they have?
- What does employer do for them when they are sick?
- is there any difference in how your employer treats your male colleagues versus you? (if yes, describe the difference.)

How well do you know your female colleagues? Do you know how much are they paid?

Do you have any language problem with your employer and/or colleagues? (if yes, describe the situation.)

Did you apply for visa/work permit before coming to Thailand? (if yes, who helped you?)

Did you sign any paper on work agreement? (if yes, did you understand what was written on the paper?)

Any disagreements with employer? (if yes, describe the situation.)

Does your employer take care of your women health/give you maternity leave or benefits? (if yes, describe what your employer does for you.)

Does your employer keep your passport and identification card?

Social

Do you know other people in Thailand? (if yes, how many of them, how did you know them, how long have you known them, and how often you keep in contact with them?)

Do you know any civil society that takes care of migrant workers? (if yes, name the civil society or NGO, and whether they have helped you before, and if they have helped you before, describe the situation.)



Appendix 2

Interview Guidelines for Employers

Profile Questionnaire

Name

Hometown

Current Work in Thailand, Duration of Work

Is your work affected by COVID-19? If yes, explain how it is affected.

About Employees

How did you know the Lao migrant worker? How long have you known them?

How long have they been working for you?

How did your workers meet you in Thailand?

Did you help to do work contract for the Lao migrant worker? If yes, explain in detail what you did. If no, explain why.

Can you describe what do you make your workers do?

Is this your first time hiring Lao migrant worker? If no, when was the first time?

What is your reason for hiring Lao migrant worker?

How many female workers do you hire and how many male workers do you hire?

Any difference in jobs that you assign them? If yes, describe the difference.

What is your reason for hiring more female/male worker?

How satisfied you are with your current workers?

What do you think of your female workers compared to male workers?

Payment and Welfare

Are you the one who pay them their salary?

Did you pay for their cost of travel to Thailand?

How much do you pay your female workers and male workers?

Do you give more pay if your worker works longer than normal for the day?

How many rest days/leave do you give your workers in a week/month?

What do you do if your worker falls sick?

What do you do if your worker becomes pregnant?

Do you bring your worker to the health clinic for health screening? If yes, how often, and what kind of screening?

Will you bring your workers to more health screening in this COVID-19 situation? If yes, how often? If no, explain why.

Do you have arrangements for the women who have a family in Laos? If yes, elaborate what are the arrangements and how are the women's family taken care of.

What will you do if your worker needs to go back Laos to take care of family for a few days?

Others

Do you know how do the workers keep in contact with their family in Laos? If yes, describe in detail, and explain how often they keep in contact with their family.

Will you continue to hire your workers in this COVID-19 situation? If yes, for how long? If no, explain why, and will you hire them again after COVID-19 situation improves?

Will the amount of pay you give your workers change in this COVID-19 situation? If yes, describe the difference in the amount of pay.

Will you give them any opportunity to learn new skills for the work that they do for you?

Any disagreements with employee? (if yes, describe the situation.)

Do you have any language problem with your employer and/or colleagues? (if yes, describe the situation.)

Do you keep your workers passport and identification card with you?

Appendix 3

Interview Guidelines for Migrant Network Leaders

Profile Questionnaire

Name

Hometown

Education

Current Work in Thailand, Duration of Work

Is your work affected by COVID-19? Could you share how is it affected?

About Migrants

How did you know the Lao migrant worker? How long have you known them?

How often do you meet them in Thailand?

Where and how did you first meet the Lao migrant worker in Thailand?

Do you know who bring them to Thailand? Do you know who paid for their cost of travel to Thailand?

Did you help them to get the job in Thailand? If yes, explain how.

Do you know who help them to do work contract and visa before they come to work in Thailand? If no, who helped them to do it? If yes, explain in detail what you did.

Do you know if they bring their passport and identification card with them when they come to Thailand?

Do you know if they keep in contact with their family in Laos? If yes, how often do they keep in contact, and using what method? For those with children in Laos, do you know who take care of the children?

Do you know what is the reason that they come to work in Thailand? If yes, describe in detail and whether it is a choice for them.

Do you know what do they do at their workplace, how long have they worked for?

Do you know if their work is affected by COVID-19? If yes, explain how is it affected and what will they do about it.

Do you know how much do they earn from their work

Do you know if they are paid extra if they work longer than normal in a day?

Do you know how long do they work for in a day?

Do you know how many rest days/leave do they have in a week/month?

Do you know how are their employers treating them?

Do you know if their employer give them health benefits, like see doctor, health checkup, women's health checkup?

If they fall sick, do you help them? If yes, explain in detail how you helped them.

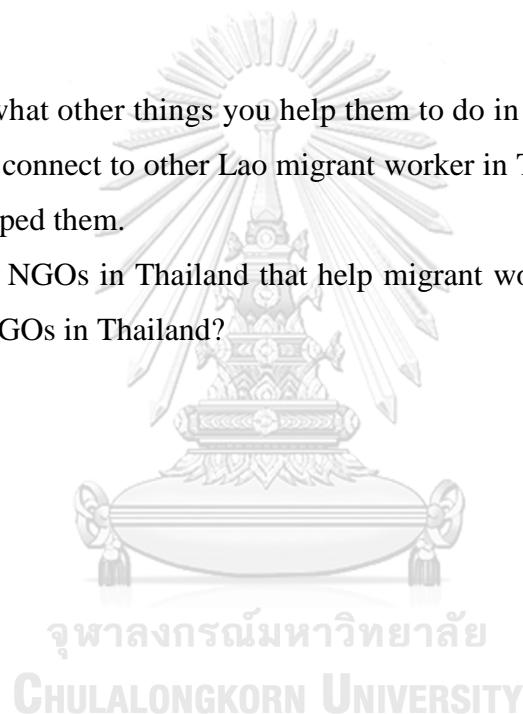
If they become pregnant in Thailand, do you help them? If yes, explain in detail how you helped them.

Others

Could you share what other things you help them to do in Thailand?

Do you help them connect to other Lao migrant worker in Thailand? If yes, explain in detail how you helped them.

Do you know any NGOs in Thailand that help migrant workers? If yes, do you help them connect to NGOs in Thailand?



Appendix 4

Interview Guidelines for Academics and Experts

Profile Questionnaire

Name

Hometown

Educational Level

History of Academic Work/Research, Topic/Specialty

Current Academic Work/Research, Duration of Research/Work, Current Academic Work/Research

About Migrants

Based on your academic work/research, what are the main reasons that Lao migrants come to work in Thailand? Do you think it was a choice for them? If yes, elaborate how it is a choice for them. If no, explain why it was not a choice for them.

In recent years, do you see more Lao female migrants coming to work in Thailand? If yes, what do you think is the reason that more Lao female migrants come to work in Thailand? If no, what other phenomenon do you see in terms of migration of CLMV to Thailand?

Based on your academic work/research, have you come across any Lao migrant women that come to work in Thailand? If yes, how long have you known them? And can you share with me their details, for example what do they work as in Thailand, how long have they been in Thailand, their age, educational level, how much are they paid for their work, how long do they work in a day, work conditions, any work benefits, are they able to have some savings and send some remittance back home, do they continue working in Thailand or go back Laos?

Based on your academic work/research, for the Lao migrant women that you come across, do you think that they are treated the same as Lao men by their employers, in terms of wages, work benefits, type of work, work conditions?

For those Lao women that come across, are any of them pregnant while working in Thailand or married with children? If yes, do you know if they have any family

benefits from their work, such as maternity, pregnancy, women's health, childcare benefits? Do you also know how are their children taken care of when they are here working in Thailand?

In this COVID-19 situation, for the Lao migrant women that you come across and are still in Thailand, do you know if their work is affected by COVID-19? If yes, could you share with me their current circumstances, how they are affected by COVID-19, and whether they will go back to Laos or stay in Thailand?

Others

Based on your academic work/research, do you have know/have any connections with NGOs that can help migrant workers working in Thailand? If yes, can you share with me what are the NGOs? Did you help connect any Lao migrant women to these NGOs? If yes, can you share with me what you did?

As an academic knowledgeable about migration and the circumstances of migrants, what do you think is needed to improve Lao migrant women's circumstances in terms of their wages, type of work, work conditions, and work benefits? How do you think this can be done?

Do you think that for Lao migrant women to learn new skills, it will help improve their circumstances in terms of wages, type of work, work conditions, and work benefits? Why or why not? How do you think this can be done?

As an academic knowledgeable about migration and the circumstances of migrants, what do you think are the gaps in Lao migrant women's welfare and benefits at work, such as health checkups, health and accident insurance, leave, maternity/childcare benefits? What do you think could be done to lessen these gaps, and how?

As an academic/expert, what do you think are the gaps in Lao migrant women's knowledge about labour rights? Do you think that educating Lao migrant women about their labour rights will help improve their circumstances in terms of wages, type of work, work conditions, and work benefits? Why or why not? What do you think could be done, with whom, and how?

Appendix 5

Interview Guidelines for Civil Society/International Organizations

Profile Questionnaire

Name

Hometown

Education

History of NGO/civil society work, duration of work

Current NGO/civil society work, duration of work

About Migrants

Based on your organization work, what are the main reasons that Lao migrants come to work in Thailand? Do you think it was a choice for them? If yes, elaborate how it is a choice for them. If no, explain why it was not a choice for them.

In recent years, do you see more Lao female migrants coming to work in Thailand? If yes, what do you think is the reason that more Lao female migrants come to work in Thailand? If no, what other phenomenon do you see in terms of migration to Thailand?

Based on your organization's work, have you come across any Lao migrant women that come to work in Thailand? If yes, how long have you known them? And could you share with me their details, for example what do they work as in Thailand, how long have they been in Thailand, their age, whether they are married, level of education, how much are they paid for their work, how long do they work in a day, work conditions, do they have any work contract, any work benefits, are they able to have some savings and send some remittance back home, do they continue working in Thailand or go back Laos?

Based on your organization's work, for the Lao migrant women that you come across, do you think that they are treated the same as Lao men by their employers, in terms of wages, work benefits, type of work, work conditions?

For those Lao women that you come across, are any of them pregnant while working in Thailand or are married with children? If yes, do they have any work benefits related to maternity, pregnancy, women's health, childcare benefits?

Do you also know how are their children taken care of while they are here working in Thailand?

In this COVID-19 situation, for the Lao migrant women that you come across and are still in Thailand, do you know if their work is affected by COVID-19? If yes, could you share with me their current circumstances, how they are affected by COVID-19, and whether they will go back to Laos or stay in Thailand? As part of an organization, are there any plans to help them cope better with this COVID-19 situation?

Others

As part of an organization, what do you think are the gaps in Lao migrant women's welfare and benefits at work, such as health checkups, health and accident insurance, leave, maternity/childcare benefits? As part of an organization, what do you think could be done to lessen these gaps, with whom, and how?

As part of an organization, what do you think are the gaps in Lao migrant women's knowledge about labour rights? Do you think that educating Lao migrant women about their labour rights will help improve their circumstances in terms of wages, type of work, work conditions, and work benefits? Why or why not? What do you think could be done, with whom, and how?

As part of an organization, did you help any Lao migrant women in any way? If yes, describe what you did to help them, and how it benefitted them. Do you also know other organizations that can help these Lao migrant women? If yes, what are the names of the organization, and did you help connect them to those organizations?

As part of an organization, did you help connect any Lao migrant women to your organization and/or other organization? Did you help them contact their family in Laos? If yes, describe what you did to help them, and how it benefitted them.

As part of an organization, what do you think is needed to improve Lao migrant women's circumstances in terms of their wages, type of work, work conditions, and work benefits? How do you think this can be done?

Do you think that for Lao migrant women to learn new skills, it will help improve their circumstances in terms of wages, type of work, work conditions, and work benefits? Why or why not? How do you think this can be done?



REFERENCES



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