

Transnational Lives and Shifting Roles: Language, Financial Independence, and Family Dynamics among Laotian Migrant Women in Thailand

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Abstract

This article investigates the intersection of language, cultural affinity, and financial independence in shaping the integration and autonomy of Laotian migrant women in Thailand's Isaan region, as well as the socio-economic impacts on their left-behind families in Laos. Drawing on 15 in-depth interviews with Laotian migrant women in Mukdahan, Thailand, and 15 interviews with their families in Savannakhet, Laos, the study employs a transnationalism framework to analyze ongoing cross-border connections and their influence on identity, livelihoods, and family dynamics. Findings reveal that shared linguistic and cultural ties between Laotian migrants and the Isaan community significantly ease social barriers, foster workplace harmony, and create supportive environments conducive to both economic participation and social integration. Financial independence emerges as a key driver of enhanced autonomy, enabling migrant women to access essential services, expand social networks, and pursue personal growth while also mitigating the effects of social exclusion. For families left behind, migration requires reorganizing caregiving and financial responsibilities. Remittances serve both as crucial economic support and as indicators of social status. However, families remaining in Laos face increased social pressures and community expectations, which can heighten emotional strain and disrupt traditional gender roles. The study highlights the resilience and adaptability of migrants and their families while emphasizing the vulnerabilities introduced by migration-related changes. From a transnational perspective, this article offers nuanced insights into the complex interplay among migration, gender, and social change in the Mekong region.

Keywords: Laotian migrant women, Left-behind family, Transnationalism, Family dynamics

Introduction

Migration from Laos to Thailand, especially among women, signals significant socio-economic shifts in the Mekong region. The close cultural and geographical ties between Laos and Thailand, particularly in Isaan, have historically supported cross-border movement, as communities on both sides of the Mekong River share language, ethnic roots, and social networks. These shared cultural identities lead Lao migrants to view Isaan not as entirely foreign but as an extension of their own cultural space, facilitating settlement, labor-market entry, and daily social interactions (Phrakhrusutheepattumakon et al., 2025).

Contemporary migration patterns differ from earlier periods mainly due to the increasing feminization

of migration and changing transnational relationships. In the past, migration in Laos was predominantly male, with social norms and family expectations that restricted women's independent mobility (Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022). However, since the late 1990s, more Lao women have been migrating independently or as main breadwinners. This shift was driven by rural poverty, limited local job opportunities, growing demand for informal, gendered labor in Thailand, and regional economic integration efforts such as ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Subregion (Phetsiriseng, 2007).

As Kusakabe (2004) noted, the formalization of border trade has altered labor divisions, creating new opportunities for women in fields such as weaving and

trade; however, these gains are often compromised by lingering expectations regarding domestic duties. This complex relationship between economic modernization and cultural continuity sets the stage for understanding the experiences of Laotian migrant women in Thailand. Migration has significant social effects, especially for women. A study by Petitet and Phetchanpheng (2022) found that as more women in Laos become mobile for education and work, family structures and gender norms are changing. While migration can give women more independence and challenge traditional family roles, it also brings new pressures and expectations, both at home and in the communities they live in.

On the one hand, economic changes and widespread modernization remove social control from the family. Family, as one form of social organization built on biological and marital relationships, shares resources, utilizes labor for particular tasks and activities, and connects to the broader community. In the past, agricultural production and economic settings were recognized as a family mode of social organization. Waite (2000) highlighted that the family mode of social organization has been changing in response to the market economy and urbanization. There are increasing opportunities for employment outside the family. As a result, elders or parents no longer have complete control over their daughters' or sons' time, resources, and other life choices.

Gendered aspects of this migration are especially prominent, as it provides many women with greater financial independence and challenges traditional family roles. However, it also subjects them to social stigma, increased risk of exploitation in irregular or informal sectors, and high expectations for financial support and other responsibilities both at home and in their country of origin (Phetsiriseng, 2007). The open border and strong interpersonal networks facilitate physical movement and continuous exchange of resources, cultural practices, and care, reinforcing a deeply gendered transnational connection that shapes obligations and impacts (Phrakhrusutheepatummakon et al., 2025; Rungmanee, 2015).

This study explores the complex cross-border migration and its effects on left-behind families through the lens of transnationalism. It provides a valuable lens for examining the experiences of Laotian migrant women in Thailand, focusing on how their ongoing

cross-border connections influence their identities, livelihoods, and family relationships in both Thailand and Laos. Rather than viewing migration as a one-directional process of assimilation, transnationalism shows how these women actively maintain ties to both countries through economic, social, and cultural exchanges (Schiller et al., 1992; Vertovec, 2004). For example, shared language and cultural practices with the Isaan community in Thailand support their integration and workplace harmony, while remittances sent to Laos help meet family obligations and boost social standing at home (Rungmanee, 2015; Kusakabe, 2004). These examples demonstrate how Laotian migrant women are interconnected within transnational social fields, continually balancing their roles and responsibilities across borders (Faist, 2012).

Adopting a transnational perspective also uncovers the complexities of family and community expectations that persist despite physical separation. Remittances are not just financial transfers; they are tied to social obligations that affect both the well-being and social standing of families in Laos and the autonomy of women in Thailand (Portes, 2015; Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022). The emotional and practical burdens experienced by left-behind families, along with migrants' adaptation strategies, illustrate the interconnectedness of lives and livelihoods across borders as a key feature of transnationalism (Basch et al., 1994). With a particular focus on these ongoing cross-border practices, this article extends beyond traditional migration models, offering a more nuanced understanding of how migration and social change are navigated within a transnational context (Schiller et al., 1992; Vertovec, 2004). Hence, this study situates Laotian women's migration within the context of shared cultural space and evolving gender norms in family structure, and examines the interconnectedness of migrant women's lives, the left-behind families, and the transnational social fields they navigate daily.

Existing scholarship on domestic and cross-border migration of Laotian women

Several studies on Laos have increasingly focused on the interplay between cross-border trade, migration, and evolving gender roles, highlighting the nuanced ways local traditions intersect with new economic realities. According to Kusakabe (2004), the

formalization of border trade between Laos and Thailand has affected labor divisions along gender lines, especially among weavers in Sayaboury and Khammouane provinces. The study reveals that while commercializing traditional weaving has opened income opportunities for women, it remains a secondary role to their primary domestic duties in many communities. Interestingly, women traders have demonstrated adaptability in cross-border markets, yet local customs continue to influence how their work is valued.

Thus, Phouxay et al. (2010) and Phouxay (2010) have extensively studied internal migration patterns. They found that, despite urbanization, internal migration rates are declining, primarily due to improvements in rural resettlement programs. Their research also indicates that rural-urban migration is becoming increasingly common among women, with many young women relocating to cities for employment, particularly in the garment industry. Additionally, there is a significant amount of undocumented migration to Thailand, which presents both benefits and challenges for migrants and their communities.

Building on these themes, Rungmanee (2015) examines the connections between internal and cross-border migration in Laos and Thailand. The research reveals that many Lao migrants take a rural-to-rural route before moving to urban areas in Thailand, primarily due to labor shortages in rural areas. The lack of clear boundaries between internal and international migration is linked to the shared cultural and linguistic ties along the border.

Keola (2020) changes the focus to how export-oriented agriculture affects internal migration. They've found a trend of people moving to northern provinces, where agricultural exports, especially to China, have driven high labor demand. This pattern differs from traditional migration, as it involves moving to previously unpopulated, remote areas driven by agricultural growth rather than industrial growth.

Petit et Phetchanpheng (2022) examine the social consequences of migration, particularly for women. Their ethnographic research reveals that increasing female mobility for education and employment is reshaping traditional family structures and gender roles. Migration offers young women greater autonomy and challenges established kinship norms,

thereby contributing to broader social transformation in Laotian society.

Schenk-Sandbergen (2024) examines the impact of rural change and land policy reforms on women's land rights in both matrilineal and patrilineal communities. The study finds that infrastructure development and land concessions are undermining women's customary land rights, especially in matrilineal villages. However, the adoption of matrilineal customs by some patrilineal groups may promote greater gender equality in land ownership.

Despite these insights, several gaps remain. Existing research indicates that the relationship between globalization, migration, and gender in Laos is complex. Local customs continue to significantly influence how economic changes impact labor, family dynamics, and women's rights. However, research on the socio-economic effects of cross-border mobility on left-behind populations, mainly the elderly and children, is lacking. Thus, there is a need for studies examining how changes in livelihoods and family dynamics driven by migration affect these groups, particularly given their reliance on remittances. Moreover, it is crucial to thoroughly comprehend the social and cultural implications of migration, especially for vulnerable populations.

Methodology

This article examines how language, cultural affinity, and financial independence intersect to facilitate the integration and autonomy of Laotian migrant women in Thailand's Isaan region. Through 15 in-depth interviews with Laotian migrant women in Mukdahan, Thailand, this study examines how shared language and cultural backgrounds between Laotian migrant women and local Isaan communities reduce social barriers, promote workplace harmony, and create a supportive environment that encourages both social and economic participation. The majority of participants work in various service sectors, such as restaurants and retail, and a few are housewives married to Thai partners. Boats and buses were used as their mode of transportation for crossing borders. The participants have been residing in Thailand for 3 to 27 years.

Furthermore, the article examines how migration affects family structures and overall well-being, with a specific focus on how families left behind reorganize caregiving and financial responsibilities. Through in-

depth interviews with 15 left-behind families of Laotian migrant women in Savannakhet, Laos, this study examines how remittances can affect families in two ways: by helping them fulfill their obligations and by boosting their social status. It also discusses the emotional and social pressures experienced by family members who remain in their home country. Those left-behind family members work in local wet markets in Savannakhet, Laos, selling seasonal vegetables, fruits, and traditional snacks.

The first data collection in Mukdahan, Thailand, took place in March 2025, using the snowball sampling method and local informants who connected with other Laotian migrant women. The second data collection in Savannakhet, Laos, was conducted in May 2025, using similar sampling methods, including snowball sampling and leveraging the local informant's connections. In that field research, an experienced interpreter was recruited who speaks and understands both Issan and Lao dialects well.

For the analysis, the thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative research analysis was applied to identify and report key patterns from the findings to present how language, cultural affinity, and financial independence intersect to enhance the integration and autonomy of Laotian migrant women in Thailand's Isaan region, and how migration influences family structures and overall well-being, with a specific focus on how families left behind adjust caregiving and financial responsibilities.

Most importantly, this research study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Ubon Ratchathani University and strictly adhered to the university's ethical guidelines and international standards, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality by keeping information secure, and anonymizing participant names.

Language, cultural affinity facilitating integration of Laotian migrant women in Isaan region, Thailand

The intersection of language, cultural affinity, and transnational marriage significantly shapes positive relationships between migrant workers and their host communities. For Laotian women migrants working in Thailand, particularly in the Isaan region, linguistic and cultural similarities serve as powerful facilitators of

social integration and workplace harmony. One participant highlighted the centrality of language in daily interactions, stating,

I mostly use Lao because my employer and coworkers speak Isaan, and the language we use is very similar, making communication easy and clear. But I use Thai to communicate with my children. (Interview 6, 45 years old, retail employee)

Another participant also echoed that,

I rarely use Thai at work. I speak Lao with my employer and colleagues because in Mukdahan, we use Isaan, which is like Lao. (Interview 13, 35 years old, housewife, married to a Thai partner)

These observations highlight the ease of functioning at work and home in Mukdahan, Thailand, stemming from shared linguistic roots, thereby lowering barriers and promoting a sense of belonging among migrant workers.

There isn't much that feels new to me because Mukdahan has many similarities with Laos. The biggest difference is just the currency, as the money in Thailand is worth more than in Laos. (Interview 8, 30 years old, retail employee)

Furthermore, some participants report having to adjust their language use in other parts of the country, especially in Bangkok.

While working in construction in Bangkok, I spoke Thai with both my employer and coworkers. However, after returning to work in Mukdahan, I primarily spoke Lao and Isaan, with little use of Thai. (Interview 15, 32 years old, restaurant employee)

I previously worked as a housemaid in Bangkok, where I used Thai to communicate. Then, I decided to return to Mukdahan with my family. Here, I mainly communicate in Isaan and Lao (Interview 12, 40 years old, restaurant employee)

The above observations indicate that language use differs between the Isaan region and Bangkok. Being able to speak Isaan and Lao in Mukdahan province is a favorable option for long-term settlement and business opportunities, as they are more comfortable, familiar, and feel at home there than in a big city like Bangkok. Moreover, this suggests that "Mukdahan," a sister province of Savannakhet, Laos, shares many cultural practices familiar to Laotian migrant workers, helping them adapt and fit into the local community. With shared language and customs between the two border

provinces, the Isaan region, including Mukdahan province, is influenced by Lao culture, as seen in its arts, architecture, food, and dress. Familiarity with local landscapes and flexibility in using the local language (Isaan) enhance the integration of Laotian migrant women into the local community. The use of the Isaan language in the workplace is widespread and standard in Mukdahan province.

Aside from shared cultural and language similarities, the short travel distance makes Issan regions more feasible for migrants, as they can make frequent visits home and are more accessible to cross-border employment opportunities. One participant highlighted the convenient transportation options and the distance to commute.

I took a bus between Thailand and Laos, crossing the Thai Lao Friendship Bridge 2 (Mukdahan–Savannakhet). (Interview 2, 38 years old, housewife)

Moreover, some participants highlight how pre-existing social networks help them integrate and settle in the region, such as Mukdahan, Thailand.

I didn't find the job myself. My older sister, who came to work before me, helped me get the job. (Interview 11, 40 years old, restaurant employee)

My eldest sister, who had already moved to Thailand, invited me to come live and work with her. I decided to go. (Interview 4, 32 years old, chef)

Cultural proximity extends beyond language, influencing everyday practices and social norms. The shared traditions and values between Laotian women migrants and the Isaan community create a familiar environment that facilitates adaptation. This cultural resonance not only improves workplace interactions but also fosters mutual respect and camaraderie.

The significance of a supportive work environment, cultivated through these shared backgrounds, is evident in the experiences of another participant:

My employer is kind, and I'm quite satisfied with the job. The work isn't hard, and I earn 450 baht per day, while in Laos, I would earn 250 baht per day. There are also bonuses during holidays like Chinese New Year, as well as overtime pay. My employer provides meals every day at work and gives me clothing. Both the employer and coworkers teach me new skills needed for the job. This has created a good work environment

because I get along well with my employer and colleagues. (Interview 8, 30 years old, retail employee)

The participant's satisfaction is closely tied to the inclusive, nurturing atmosphere that stems from cultural and linguistic familiarity.

Language adaptation is also a strategic tool for upward mobility and deeper integration. As one participant described,

I adapted to Thai culture, with language being the first thing I adjusted to since I needed to use Thai for work. My employer was very kind, allowing me to take additional leave beyond the designated days off. The work environment was pleasant, and my employer gave me a lot of freedom in my tasks, which made me feel comfortable at work. (Interview 4, 32 years old, chef)

Those narratives of Laotian women migrants illustrate how learning the host country's language not only fulfills practical needs but also paves the way for greater autonomy and job satisfaction. The workplace becomes a hub for mutual learning and skill development, as evidenced by collaborative relationships and ongoing exchanges of knowledge and support, which strengthen workplace unity and foster a sense of shared purpose.

Furthermore, employers who show kindness and flexibility, such as offering extra time off or providing daily meals and clothing, help build a positive work environment. These acts, rooted in cultural understanding and mutual respect, are key to building trust and loyalty among migrant workers. Overall, Laotian women migrants in Thailand have found that language skills, shared culture, and connections across borders all contribute to building strong bonds with their host community. This combination of factors enhances communication, helps individuals understand one another, and fosters a sense of unity, ultimately contributing to migrants' well-being and successful integration.

Enhanced autonomy through financial independence among Laotian migrant women in Thailand

Financial independence has become a key factor in enhancing the autonomy of Laotian migrant women married to Thai partners. Interviewees consistently described how increased financial resources have

allowed them to access essential services and improve their quality of life. As some participants explained,

I have more financial ability now, and everything in Thailand is easily accessible, such as healthcare. I have formed good friendships through my former work. Since moving to Thailand, I have become much happier, no longer feeling anxious or stressed. (Interview 2, 38 years old, housewife, married to a Thai partner)

Living in Thailand has made everything much more convenient, with easy access to services like healthcare and education for my children. This has greatly reduced my stress. (Interview 6, 45 years old, Retail employee, married to a Thai partner)

These narratives highlight the direct connection between financial stability and reduced anxiety, as well as the increased ability to engage more fully in society. Access to healthcare and other public services was frequently cited as a benefit of financial security. The ease of obtaining medical care in Thailand, compared to their experiences in Laos, was particularly significant for these migrant women. This accessibility not only enhanced their physical well-being but also fostered a sense of security and belonging in their new environment. The ability to seek care without financial barriers bolstered their autonomy and diminished dependence on others.

Thus, social integration, supported by work and financial independence, played a crucial role in their adjustment. Building friendships through employment provided both emotional support and practical guidance. One participant noted,

I have learned job skills, and good friends have guided me on how to live and explore other career opportunities. (Interview 9, 46 years old, housewife, married to a Thai Partner)

This illustrates how economic participation nurtures social networks that are essential for navigating the challenges of migration and adaptation. Additionally, skill acquisition and career mobility were significant themes. The opportunity to learn new skills and explore various avenues of making a living expanded their options and reduced reliance on a single income source. This diversification of skills and opportunities improved their sense of agency and control over their lives.

Despite facing social challenges such as gossip or criticism from others, financial independence helped the interviewees remain resilient. One woman reflected,

There are some people who don't like me, and I have been gossiped about or criticized. But I don't let it bother me. I have become more diligent, my quality of life has improved, and I'm no longer as hungry as I was in Laos. (Interview 9, 46 years old, housewife, married to a Thai Partner)

Her experience demonstrates how economic security can protect against social exclusion, allowing individuals to focus on self-improvement. With greater financial stability, participants reported a significant reduction in stress and the development of clearer life goals. As one stated,

The stress and worries I had before have been reduced, and I now have more clear goals in life because I want to provide a better life for myself and make life more comfortable for my family in Laos. (Interview 9, 46 years old, housewife, married to a Thai Partner)

This shift from daily survival to future planning is a key marker of enhanced autonomy and personal growth. Adaptability and strategic decision-making were further developed as a result of their experiences in Thailand. This adaptability is both a product and a driver of their increasing independence. Some participants noted that,

I have learned survival skills in Thailand, such as the need to be more hardworking and adaptable in my work. Before doing anything, I have to think carefully. Most importantly, I have learned how to find jobs in Thailand. (Interview 5, 37 years old, married to a Thai Partner)

My knowledge and skills in business have improved. Although I didn't attend school, I have learned to live and develop work skills while in Thailand. Earning money has become more convenient, and I can pursue various types of work. I now have a clearer life goal: to be patient and fight for my child's future, ensuring they have a better life. (Interview 11, 40 years old, restaurant employee)

Finally, family responsibilities, especially caring for children, served as a powerful motivation for developing autonomy. The responsibility to provide for their families inspired these women to pursue financial independence and to adopt proactive strategies to secure a better future, reinforcing the connection between

economic security and enhanced personal agency. One participant noted that,

My perspective has changed because I now have children to take care of. I am no longer alone like when I first arrived. (Interview 5, 37 years old, married to a Thai Partner)

The narratives of Laotian migrant women married to Thai partners highlight how financial independence transforms their autonomy, well-being, and social integration. Increased resources enhance access to essential services, such as healthcare, and empower individuals to engage with society, build supportive networks, and pursue personal growth and development. On the one hand, those Laotian migrant women who are not married to Thai partners still find similar growth and development, as one participant noted,

My quality of life has improved; I'm no longer struggling like before and don't have the worries I used to. I now have a clear goal in life: I want to open my own shop. I don't want to be an employee anymore because I've gained enough work experience. I'd like to try becoming a business owner. That's all I really need. (Interview 12, 40 years old, restaurant employee)

The ability to secure employment and acquire new skills broadens opportunities, reduces dependency, and fosters resilience in the face of societal challenges. Furthermore, financial stability enables them to shift from immediate hardship to planning, therefore enhancing both individual agency and family security. Ultimately, the pursuit of financial independence emerges as a central driver of adaptability, decision-making, and belonging, underscoring its role in successful adjustment and enhanced autonomy for Laotian migrant women in Thailand.

Reorganization of care and financial responsibilities in the left-behind families

Migration profoundly reshapes the division of labor within left-behind families, as the interview data support. When a primary caregiver moves for work, other family members often assume new or increased responsibilities. One participant described,

My older brother and younger brother take care of my mother. I send them money occasionally, about 2,000 baht each time. (Interview 13, 35 years old, housewife, married to a Thai partner)

This narrative illustrates a typical pattern: while the migrant provides financial support, siblings or other relatives step in to deliver daily care, ensuring that the needs of elderly family members are met in the migrant's absence. Remittances play a crucial role in helping people fulfill their family responsibilities from a distance. The fact that they send money occasionally demonstrates how financial transfers can help compensate for their physical absence. This arrangement enables migrants to stay connected and feel accountable to their families, even if those at home assume the primary caregiving tasks.

Thus, childcare arrangements also undergo a significant transformation. One participant shared,

I have three children: two sons who live with me in Thailand and one daughter who is under the care of my mother-in-law. I spend 3,000 baht each month for my daughter's daily expenses and for my mother-in-law to take care of her. The distribution of the money depends on what my mother-in-law needs." (Interview 13, 35 years old, housewife, married to a Thai partner)

This example shows the delegation of caregiving to extended family members, with the migrant parent serving as the financial provider and decision-maker from a distance. Moreover, these financial arrangements offer significant flexibility. One interviewee put it this way: "*The money gets distributed based on what my mother-in-law needs.*" This approach can adapt to changing circumstances, but it also introduces some uncertainty.

Moreover, elder care is often shared among several family members, thereby diffusing the caregiving burden. For instance, one participant stated,

My younger sister, brother-in-law, and older brother take care of my mother, while I bring my children to live with me in Thailand. (Interview 10, 38 years old, waitress)

This collective approach not only ensures continuity of care but also reflects the family's ability to adapt in response to migration-related disruptions. Furthermore, children's living arrangements are similarly impacted, often leading to family fragmentation. One participant noted,

I have three children and my mother left at home. While I am working in Thailand, my neighbors and relatives help me to take care of them. (Interview 1, 45 years old, a shopkeeper)

Such arrangements can affect children's sense of stability and belonging, but they also showcase the adaptability of family and community networks in supporting left-behind members. Additionally, neighborhoods and extended family members who play a role in caregiving demonstrate the significance of community support networks. As mentioned earlier, people often say, "*Neighbors and relatives help me take care of them*," suggesting that caring for kids and older adults is not solely a family responsibility, but a collective effort within the community. This can help strengthen relationships, but it can also put extra pressure on those who provide care without being recognized or paid for it.

On the whole, the reorganization of caregiving and financial responsibilities in left-behind families shows both resilience and vulnerability. Laotian migrant women maintain connections with their families through remittances and shared decision-making, while those who remain at home or in the community adapt to the increasing demand for caregiving.

Social pressure, community expectations, and the well-being of family left behind

Family members left behind by Laotian migrant women face a lot of social pressure from their neighbors and the broader community, who expect migration to bring real financial gains. This is typically compared to other families whose relatives have gone abroad, returned with substantial wealth, and improved their lives. As one older sister of a Laotian migrant woman noted,

They say other people go abroad to work and come back with a new house, a car, and gold, but my sister returns with nothing. (Interview 7, 38 years old, elder sister of Laotian migrant woman)

These remarks highlight the community's tendency to equate successful migration with material wealth, fostering an atmosphere of judgment and inadequacy for families who fail to meet these expectations. That pressure is intensified by the community's practice of social comparison, which can create feelings of shame and disappointment among families left behind. For instance, a mother of a Laotian migrant woman recounted,

My neighbors said you have children but can't rely on them, implying that I have a daughter who doesn't

stay home to care for her parents. They said she goes to work but does not transfer much money like other people's children. (Interview 6, 36 years old, mother of Laotian migrant woman)

This narrative shows how neighbors' comments not only compare remittance flows but also question the reliability and filial responsibility of migrant children, adding to the emotional burden on those left behind. Thus, gendered expectations significantly shape these pressures. In many rural areas, daughters are typically expected to stay home and care for their aging parents (Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022). When they migrate, this norm is disrupted, and the community often criticizes them for neglecting their family duties. The mother's narrative about what the neighbors say shows how migration can challenge traditional roles and create social tension within families and communities.

Beyond social judgment, the absence of migrant family members places greater practical burdens on those who stay at home. The younger sister of a Laotian migrant woman described her situation:

There are fewer people in the house now, which means I have more household responsibilities. I am the only one left to take care of the family because my older sister works in Thailand, and my younger sister works in Vientiane. During the rice-farming season or other labor-intensive periods, it's more difficult because we're short on help and don't have enough money to hire. (Interview 1, 27 years old, younger sister of Laotian migrant woman)

This statement highlights how migration can exacerbate labor shortages and increase the burden on family members left behind, particularly during critical agricultural periods. In addition to community pressure, increased household responsibilities can combine to cause emotional strain and social isolation for those left behind. Being exposed to gossip and negative comparisons while also dealing with the practical challenges of daily life can take a toll on the well-being of family members left behind. However, these emotional effects are often overlooked in migration studies, which tend to focus more on economic outcomes than on the social and psychological costs that families and individuals face.

On the one hand, remittances do more than just provide financial support; they also foster social connections. They also serve as a sign of social status

within the community. When families receive a substantial amount of money from abroad, they are perceived as successful. Meanwhile, families that receive little in remittances are usually the subject of gossip and negative comparisons. The idea that migration should bring wealth home puts extra pressure on migrants and their families, which leads to disappointment and strained family relationships if those expectations are not met. So, some participants noted that,

My community looks at us with admiration and are happy that we have work and are able to send money to support the family. (Interview 9, 46 years old, housewife, married to a Thai partner)

My relatives and neighbors admire and are happy that I am working in Thailand. When they see me, they also want to come. (Interview 10, 38 years old, waitress)

These observations highlight how their social mobility is perceived in relation to their employment status. Narratives within the community about whether migration is successful can have a lasting impact on family relationships and an individual's self-esteem. When left-behind relatives are constantly told they have not gained financially from migration, it can erode their confidence and sense of belonging. This ongoing social pressure can also influence future migration decisions as families consider the potential social costs against the expected economic gains.

Discussion

Transnational integration: Experiences of Laotian migrant women in Thailand

A key finding of this article is the role of shared language and cultural affinity in facilitating the integration of Laotian migrant women, particularly in the Isaan region of Thailand. The linguistic similarities between Lao and the Isaan dialect of Thai reduce communication barriers, fostering smoother workplace interactions and a sense of belonging. This cultural proximity extends beyond language, encompassing shared traditions and values that create a familiar environment, making the workplace less intimidating and promoting mutual respect and harmony.

Beyond language barriers, pre-existing kinship networks and social connections play a crucial role in the integration of Laotian migrants. Many women depend on family and familiar contacts for employment

and housing, reflecting broader research on social capital's influence on migration paths. Studies by Phouxay et al. (2010), Phouxay (2010), and Rungmanee (2015) highlight how established social ties, both within Laos and across borders, ease initial settlement challenges and support navigation of local labor markets and social integration. Consequently, this process is not just an individual effort but is rooted in networks of mutual aid and shared identity, which promote resilience and empowerment among migrant women.

However, integration experiences are not uniform and depend on context, especially for Laotian migrants who previously worked in urban areas like Bangkok, where linguistic and cultural similarities are less evident. In these cases, proficiency in Thai is crucial for social mobility and employment in more diverse workplaces. Kusakabe (2004) and Petit et al. (2022) also note that improving language skills supports practical employment needs and promotes upward mobility and better integration. Overall, this article's findings reinforce the importance of language adaptation for long-term well-being and economic progress for migrant women and in broader migration contexts.

Therefore, the Mukdahan-Savannakhet border region provides an environment where Laotian women can prosper. Its closeness to home, convenient travel, and frequent cross-border visits strengthen transnational ties, enabling migrants to move effortlessly between social spheres. This adaptability is essential for maintaining family connections and accessing employment and resources not available in Laos (Keola, 2020; Schenk-Sandbergen, 2024). The process of integrating Laotian migrant women in Isaan is dynamic, influenced by shared language, cultural affinity, supportive social networks, and transnational opportunities, collectively fostering a sophisticated understanding of cross-border integration.

Financial independence and family transformations: transnational lives of Laotian migrant women in Thailand

Financial independence fundamentally transforms the roles Laotian migrant women assume in transnational migration, family dynamics, and social integration in Thailand (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Petit et al. & Phetchanpheng, 2022). Besides enhancing economic

security, earning and controlling wages grants women greater agency in making personal and family decisions, challenging traditional power hierarchies that might limit their roles (Moskal, 2011; Kusakabe, 2004). According to Jampaklay et al. (2022) and Phouxay et al. (2010), migration serves both as a response to economic needs and a proactive strategy to attain independence and shape family futures, evidenced by women shifting from dependents to income earners and household heads.

Financial independence is a key theme in the stories of Laotian migrant women. This economic empowerment is closely tied to lower anxiety, more independence, and the ability to plan. Most importantly, financial independence mediates intergenerational relationships within transnational families. Sending money back home not only meets their family's needs but also boosts their social status and shifts in familial responsibility within their families and communities in Laos (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Petit et & Phetchanpheng, 2022). This transformation is especially pronounced in matrilineal contexts like Laos (Schenk- Sandbergen, 2024), where women's economic contributions can increase their influence beyond property rights and reshape the expectations of dependents and communities at home.

However, financial independence for Laotian migrant women married to Thai partners who remain stay-at-home wives can be paradoxical. They receive financial support for their stay in Thailand, and their everyday expenses are primarily covered by their husbands. They are at ease knowing their partners support them financially, but their spending capacity can be limited as they are stay-at-home wives; they still send money to support their left-behind family members, reshaping the roles of migrant women once again. Furthermore, the findings showed that Laotian migrant women, regardless of marital status, who are employed have more freedom and authority over their wages.

Moreover, migration has a profound impact on family structures in Laos. The country's traditional matrilineal and matrilocal systems, in which women hold significant status and property rights, are being altered as they assume dual roles as income earners and caregivers. When people migrate, they leave their children in the care of extended family, which changes relationships between generations and challenges

traditional gender roles. For many, successful migration is measured by their ability to send money home and eventually return to invest in their family's well-being or start a new business (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Petit et & Phetchanpheng, 2022).

Overall, the article reveals that Laotian migrant women are not merely passive recipients of external forces but active shapers of their own lives. Through transnational activities, they cultivate and adapt to shifting family dynamics, making significant contributions to both their host and home countries (Moskal, 2011). Their stories highlight the transformative power of migration, not only for individual women but also for the broader social and economic contexts of Laos and Thailand (Jampaklay et al., 2022; Petit et & Phetchanpheng, 2022).

Transnational social contracts: Remittances as caregiving currency and community negotiation in Laotian-Thai migration

Laotian migration to Thailand illustrates how financial remittances serve as social contracts, not just economic transactions. Findings suggest that migrants occasionally send remittances to meet caregiving needs through their extended family networks. This aligns with Portes' (2015) idea that remittances are communicative acts that shape family power dynamics, reinforcing migrants' decision-making authority despite their physical absence. Furthermore, Petit et and Phetchanpheng (2022) stress that these transfers maintain social standing: families receiving substantial remittances gain community respect, while others face criticism.

Financial remittances from migrants not only fulfill economic needs but also reinforce social bonds and familial obligations. These transfers often serve as visible markers of care and responsibility, shaping perceptions of filial piety and parental duty within transnational families. The act of sending money becomes a means for migrants to maintain their roles within the family, even from afar, and to negotiate their social standing among relatives and community members (Jampaklay et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, reorganizing caregiving roles due to migration can cause tension and emotional strain within families. As traditional expectations are challenged, those left behind must adapt to increased workloads and

shifting responsibilities. This can lead to disagreements over the quality of care and the reliability of absent family members, as well as feelings of guilt or inadequacy among migrants who are unable to contribute physically (Singkul et al., 2019). These dynamics illustrate how transnational migration fosters hybrid identities and evolving family systems, where economic support and emotional ties are continually renegotiated across geographical distances.

Thus, family structures undergo significant reorganization, challenging traditional caregiving norms and expectations. When primary caregivers move away, siblings and in-laws take on daily responsibilities. For example, three siblings may work together to care for their elderly mother while the migrant helps cover her medical expenses (Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022). However, these arrangements can be vulnerable during farming seasons, as labor shortages force those left behind to handle heavier workloads without enough money to hire help (Moskal, 2011).

Moreover, communities put pressure on individuals through material comparisons, linking migration success to visible wealth and possessions. Social expectations tend to focus more on economic outcomes than on emotional support. Traditional gender norms exacerbate this scrutiny, as daughters who migrate for work challenge the traditional family roles, leading to accusations of neglecting their parents (Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022).

These patterns reflect significant structural changes where migration transforms institutions, shifting from family hierarchies to labor markets. The increasing number of mobile mothers challenges traditional models of assimilation, as migrants use their earnings to enhance living conditions in their hometowns while adapting to Thai societal norms (Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022; Vertovec, 2004). This dual embeddedness, where migrants affect both their home and host communities, supports Schiller's claim that transnational practices lead to hybrid identities and economic systems (Moskal, 2011; Vertovec, 2004).

Laotian migration to Thailand reveals that remittances are not only financial but also social contracts, shaping family dynamics and transnational ties (Jampaklay et al., 2022). These transfers enhance migrants' authority and caregiving roles while signaling their social status within families and communities

(Moskal, 2011). The changes in caregiving roles and the emotional struggles faced by families left behind suggest a shift in traditional norms as economic needs clash with social expectations (Singkul et al., 2019). Community scrutiny and gender pressures further complicate these dynamics, demonstrating how migration creates hybrid identities and alters family systems that link home and host societies (Petitet & Phetchanpheng, 2022; Vertovec, 2004). Ultimately, the presence of Laotian migrants in both Thailand and Laos reflects broader transnational patterns where economic support, social recognition, and familial duties are managed across borders.

Conclusion

This article has shown how Laotian migrant women in Thailand's Isaan region navigate integration and autonomy by leveraging shared language and culture, transnational mobility, and financial independence. Using the cultural and linguistic similarities between Savannakhet and Mukdahan, the study shows these women encounter fewer social barriers, find more supportive workplaces, and inhabit social environments that promote both economic activity and belonging. Additionally, short travel distances and established cross-border networks support circular migration and transnational marriages, positioning women within vibrant flows of people, care, and resources across the Mekong.

Moreover, transnational economic activities, family members' interactions, and improved infrastructure across border provinces contribute to the emergence of a transnational space where hybrid identities form, as individuals maintain transnational ties to their place of origin and to the place where they currently reside for work or as housewives. The transnational ties simultaneously influence the migrant's social positions and identities. Their social status may not be as high as it is, as they work in various service sectors in Thailand. However, their remittances confer higher social status in their original community, as their left-behind family members are more likely to have a social reputation, reshaping local hierarchies and expectations within families left behind in Savannakhet, Laos. Transnational connections thus serve a dual purpose: they provide opportunities for social recognition and upward mobility in Laos, but also

impose obligations that can heighten emotional stress and moral expectations for both migrants and their families.

Building on this, financial independence is a key factor in gaining greater control over one's life for Laotian migrant women. Having the ability to earn a higher income and access essential services, such as healthcare, not only improves their overall well-being but also empowers them to make their own decisions and work towards personal growth. Getting involved in the economy also helps build social networks that provide emotional support and practical advice for navigating the challenges of migration. This shift from focusing on daily survival to planning marks a significant change in the lives of these women, enabling them to envision and work towards a better life for themselves and their families.

However, the benefits of migration come with tough challenges for families left behind in Laos. Redistributing caregiving and financial responsibilities often places additional burdens on family members who remain, especially during labor shortages or when community expectations increase. Remittances are both financial lifelines and symbols of social status. Yet, they also create social pressures and emotional strain, particularly when community narratives associate migration success with material wealth and prosperity. These dynamics show the two-sided nature of migration, promoting both resilience and vulnerability in transnational families.

Overall, this article reveals that Laotian migrant women are not just passive recipients of change but active shapers of it as they navigate and negotiate their roles across national borders. Their stories reflect broader trends of transnationalism, in which economic support, social recognition, and family responsibilities are continually renegotiated. Ultimately, the article underscores that transnationalism is a lived reality, with hybrid identities among Laotian migrant women, their distributed caregiving, and evolving family structures in left-behind families and communities.

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Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

No generative AI tools were used in the writing of this manuscript to generate ideas or analysis.

CRediT author statement

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