

# Education or Labor Migration: The Empowerment of Thai-So Women, Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand\*

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## Abstract

The objective of this research was to examine the influence of education and labor migration on the empowerment of Thai-So women across generations, this study employed the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to analyze decision-making roles in the areas of household, agricultural production, income control, and access to productive resources. The Kusuman district was chosen as the area of study due to the significant number of the Thai-So ethnic group, who primarily use the 'So' language to communicate within their communities and families. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select thirty-six key informants, and semi-structured interview guidelines were used as the research instrument.

**Findings reveal that:** education and labor migration are mutually reinforcing pathways to empowerment. While education offers foundational skills and social mobility, it also enables labor migration, which provides immediate financial benefits, exposure to broader social networks, and decision-making experience. Among Baby Boomers and Generation X, migration played a central role, with education having only limited influence. In contrast, Generation Y women, who had greater access to formal education, were able to secure better job opportunities outside their communities, leading to enhanced empowerment outcomes upon returning home.

This study introduces a new “Three-Layer Empowerment Model,” which conceptualizes empowerment as an interaction between socio-cultural structures,

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individual agency, and observable outcomes. The model captures how gender, ethnicity, and generational change intersect to shape empowerment trajectories in a patriarchal rural society. It also highlights the importance of integrated policy support for both educational access and labor mobility in advancing empowerment among ethnic women in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Education; Labor Migration; Women; Empowerment; Thai-So Ethnic Group; Generational Differences

## 1. Introduction

For centuries, women faced significant inequality compared to men. They were denied the right to vote, own property, and access to many types of employment. Those situations caused women to lack confidence and to face the challenges of life (Rana et al., 2024; Elsayed & Shirshikova 2023; Kaithong, 2021, pp. 110-135; Naowarat, 2018; Chiengthong, 2020, pp. 1-28). However, today, over 17 million women played significant roles in the workforce and in certain occupation farmers professional entrepreneur, service workers, product vendors and technical professionals. In Thailand, the number of female workers exceeds that of males, and the proportion of female executives in the business sector of Thailand is higher than the global and Asia-Pacific averages (UN Nations, 2024; UN Women, 2011).

Although Thai women played the crucial role in economic sectors, the majority of them still face discrimination in participation and economic opportunities compared to men. Especially, women living in the rural areas are affected by poverty, discrimination and exploitation. They are largely concentrated on secure and vulnerable jobs in the informal sector, including in agriculture and as own account and contributing family workers, with only small.

According to studies conducted in the northeastern region of Thailand, Thai-So ethnic communities—particularly in Kusuman District—exhibit strong patriarchal traditions that continue to define gender roles. Historically, Thai-So society has been governed by patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, and male-dominated decision-making structures (Thongyou, & Phongsi, 2017; Kaithong, 2021, pp. 110-135). Men were regarded



as the heads of households, while women were expected to perform domestic duties and support agricultural labor without formal recognition or authority. Within these communities, it was common for daughters to have limited access to formal education and economic independence. Marriage customs reinforced male authority, with women relocating to their husbands' households and becoming part of his extended family structure. These gender dynamics were deeply rooted in cultural values and transmitted across generations through kinship, ritual, and language.

However, recent changes - especially improved access to education and labor migration opportunities - have begun to shift these traditional structures. Field observations and interviews indicate that Thai-So women now engage more actively in education, seek employment outside their communities, and participate in household decision-making. Nevertheless, empowerment is not uniform, and what appears to be increased agency may, in some cases, reflect subtle shifts within existing traditions rather than a complete transformation. For instance, a woman might gain authority within the household due to her economic contributions from migration yet still defer to male relatives in matters involving land ownership or public leadership. Despite these changes, Thai-So women still have limited authority over land, property, and long-term household decisions, resulting in a gap in their actual empowerment. This study aims to explore how education and labor migration can enhance women's decision-making power and help close this gap.

These complexities make Thai-So women an ideal case study for examining how women's empowerment emerges under socio-cultural constraints. This research therefore seeks to understand how education and labor migration interact with entrenched gender roles to influence empowerment outcomes. Given that the study area is predominantly agricultural, the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) has been adapted for cultural specificity. The study focuses on four domains: (1) household decision-making, (2) agricultural production decisions, (3) control over income, and (4) decision-making regarding productive resources.

To better understand these dynamics, this study draws upon existing literature to identify key determinants of women's empowerment. A number of scholars have been working to empower women in a male-dominated society. As highlighted in the



literature review, several key factors determine or influence empowerment, including age, gender, marital status, nationality, social role, economic activity, intra-household distribution, and health (Aksornsri, & Saengsuwan, 2021, pp. 297-310; Buvinic et al., 2020; de Hoop, Peterman, & Anderson, 2020). In addition, other elements often considered crucial for empowerment include education, labor migration, training programs, exposure to mass media and social media, access to microfinance, and so forth (Kaithong, & Phong-siri, 2020, pp. 55-69; de Brauw, Kramer & Murphy, 2021; Aceros, Duque, & Paloma, 2021). However, this research emphasizes education and labor migration because the researcher recently conducted an observation in the specific area being studied. It was found that Thai-So women are increasingly pursuing higher education. Also, there is a significant upward trend in migrating to work in other regions. The research of Kaithong (2021) reinforced the latest observation. That is, approximately fifty years ago, majority of those migrating for work to other regions were men. After women gained access to compulsory education, better transportation, and improved communication, more of them began migrating to other regions. In present, it has been found that 15-year-old girls who are studying tend to work in other regions with relatives during school vacations, likely due to the availability of free time and familial support.

The social phenomenon as mentioned above contribute the research question-that is how do education and migration for work to other regions influence the empowerment of women? To reinforce this question, research articles, research academics and texts are reviewed. It was found that education is the essential factor that promotes women's empowerment, leading to women's rights, dignity, and security (Rana et al., 2024; Elsayed, & Shirshikova 2023; Mutyalu, 2019, pp. 138-142). Meanwhile, migration is a central element in the livelihoods of many households and expands the opportunities of women's economic, social and interpersonal relations (Aceros, Duque, & Paloma, 2021, pp. 2905-2921; de Brauw, Kramer, & Murphy, 2021; Gyae, & Jha, 2011, pp. 49-66). However, there is a few of research on education and migration among Thai-So women. Therefore, it is a good opportunity for the researcher to investigate the objective of the study.



## 2. Research Objectives

To examine the influence of education and labor migration on the empowerment of Thai-So women in the domains of household decision-making, agricultural production, income control, and access to productive resources.

## 3. Methods

A qualitative approach with in-depth interviews was employed to examine how education and labor migration influence the empowerment of Thai-So women across generations, as detailed below.

Research Area: Based on my review of both primary and secondary data, it was found that Kusuman district is home to a significant population of the Thai-So people. In Kusuman municipality, the Thai-So community, along with their spiritual leaders, has actively worked to establish a museum that showcases their cultural heritage and way of life (Kaithong, & Phongsiri, 2020, pp. 55-69). Today, Kusuman district is recognized as a key historical site for the Thai-So ethnic group in Thailand. Additionally, nearly 95 percent of the population in the study areas - Photipaisan, Kokmoung, and Nonghoynoi - identify as part of the Thai-So community. They continue to speak the 'So' language within their families and communities, preserving and transmitting their culture across generations. Notably, research, field observations, and local perspectives confirm that these three villages maintain a male-dominated, patriarchal social structure.

Key Informants: Purposive sampling technique was used to select key informants who could provide relevant insights aligned with the research objectives. A total of thirty-six key informants participated in this study. All were Thai-So women who were born, raised, and currently reside in three selected villages in Kusuman District, Sakon Nakhon Province. These villages are predominantly Thai-So communities where traditional patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence patterns, and patriarchal norms remain deeply rooted. Most of the participants have backgrounds in farming, household labor, or informal work, and many have personal experiences with labor migration and limited access to formal education.



The generational cohort theory served as the primary criterion for categorizing the informants. Following the framework of Mannheim (1952) and Reeves & Oh (2007), the women were divided into three generational groups based on their year of birth and shared life experiences: Baby Boomers (born between 1946–1964, aged 48–66), Generation X (born between 1965–1980, aged 33–47), and Generation Y (born between 1981–2000, aged 18–32). This generational classification allowed for an analysis of how empowerment trajectories have shifted over time in relation to education and labor migration experiences across age groups within the same cultural context.

**Research Instruments and Research Method:** The semi-structured interview guideline was designed to explore women's empowerment through education and labor migration in the Thai-So community. The interview questions focused on key themes such as: (1) experiences with education and barriers to schooling, (2) labor migration processes and outcomes, and (3) decision-making roles within household, agriculture, and income management.

In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-six key informants, selected purposively from three villages in Kusuman District. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. The interviewer was able to adjust the sequence of questions based on participants' responses and used probing questions to elicit detailed narratives.

**Data Analysis:** For the data analysis, the researcher personally transcribed all interview recordings, treating the resulting transcripts as primary raw data. The analysis followed a three-step qualitative process: (1) decontextualization, where meaningful units or segments were identified and coded independently of their original context; (2) recontextualization, in which the coded segments were reviewed and thematically grouped based on patterns and recurring topics; and (3) synthesis, where the researcher interpreted the themes in relation to the research questions, producing a cohesive understanding of the participants' experiences.

**Literature Review:** This literature review explores three key themes concerning women's empowerment through education and labor migration. The themes are presented as follows:



**Education and Women's Empowerment:** Education is widely acknowledged as a crucial factor in the personal development of individuals and a fundamental human right. Several empirical studies have affirmed that access to education fosters active citizenship and socio-economic mobility (Bera, 2016, pp. 184-190; Elsayed, & Shishikova, 2023). Consistent with these findings, Menon and Sharma (2020, pp. 54-64) argue that education is central to the empowerment of women, as it enhances their rights, dignity, autonomy, and security. In particular, Elsayed and Shishikova (2023) examined the large-scale expansion of public universities in Egypt during the 1960s and 1970s. Their research found that the establishment of local universities significantly increased access to higher education and generated long-term positive impacts on women's labor market outcomes and marital decisions. Thus, enhanced educational opportunities for women directly contribute to their social and economic empowerment.

**Labor Migration and Women's Empowerment:** Labor migration, especially from rural to urban areas, can provide women with new opportunities for economic independence, social mobility, and greater decision-making power. Migration can also open doors to networks, employment, and entrepreneurship, all of which can strengthen women's autonomy and self-reliance. Eryar, Tekguc, and Toktas (2019, pp. 200-221) found that internal migration in Turkey improved women's access to better jobs and increased their wages, contributing to their overall empowerment. Li, & Stodolska (2022, pp. 248-266) presented a case study of a woman from a poor rural background in China. After migrating to a large city and securing stable income, she was able to purchase her own apartment. This ownership enhanced her sense of freedom, control over her living conditions, and self-worth. These examples highlight how labor migration can act as a catalyst for women's empowerment by improving both economic status and self-perception.

**Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment:** Women's empowerment is a multidimensional process that occurs at both individual and collective levels, and within both public and private spheres. It involves interrelated social, economic, political, legal, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Key drivers of empowerment include age, gender, marital status, education, labor participation, health, access to media and digital technology, training programs, and microfinance services.



This research focuses specifically on the impact of education and labor migration in promoting empowerment among Thai-So women. The study applies an adapted framework based on Alkire et al. (2013, pp. 71-91), who identified five core dimensions of empowerment: production, resources, income, leadership, and time. For the Thai-So socio-cultural context, these dimensions have been modified to focus on decision-making power in four key areas: household management, agricultural production, income generation, and access to productive resources.

#### **4. Results**

To understand the driving forces - specifically education and labor migration - that empower Thai-So women, this section presents perspectives drawn directly from Thai-So women across generations.

**Empowerment through Education:** Although education may not empower women in every generation, it serves as a crucial foundation that enables Thai-So women to communicate with outsiders, leading to better life opportunities. Details related to education and empowerment will be explained for each generation.

**Baby Boom Generation (1946-1964):** The majority of Thai-So women, born during the year 1946 to 1964, completed Prathom 4, with very few having graduated from Prathom 6. The primary reason for their education was coercion by government officers and the village headman. The informants stated that "...if families did not allow their children to study, the parents would be jailed. The term 'jailed' became the prevalent discourse during that period..." (R. Yaibangkaew, Personal Communication, August 11, 2023; S. Rompamaung, Personal Communication, August 4, 2024). When they had the opportunity, they started studying Thai language and Mathematics. Unfortunately, especially the female students, were frequently absent from class during the rice cultivation season. They mentioned that during that time, they had to assist their parents in taking care of their younger siblings, cook rice, clean the house, etc. Consequently, their studies were interrupted. (S. Rompamaung, Personal Communication, August 5, 2023). After graduating from Prathom 4, They came to work on the farm, and the knowledge they acquired was just enough for basic communication in Thai and to read and write a





little in Thai. Therefore, education is not the driving force behind empowering the Baby Boomer generation.

Generation X (1965-1980): According to the National Education Plan of 1977, compulsory education aimed to extend from 4 to 6 years. Therefore, it was not surprising that the majority of Thai-So women, aged between 33 and 47, graduated from Prathom 6. Through interviews conducted across the three villages, it was discovered that Thai-So women, born during year 1965 to 1980, typically completed their education at Prathom 6. However, some of them graduated at Mathayom 1. Those interviewed, who graduated at Mathayom 1, mentioned that their parents encouraged them to pursue further studies. While preparing to take the exam for Mathayom 2, it was found that some lacked the financial means to cover tuition fees. Consequently, they had to discontinue their education to assist their parents on the farm (P. Phosanlee, Personal Communication, December 9, 2023; M. Kusuwan, Personal Communication, August 11, 2024). Despite having higher education compared to the baby boomers, they struggled to secure promising careers. In particular, a civil service career, which was considered their dream job, remained elusive. Unfortunately, many of them continued working as farmers or laborers. This implied that education did not significantly influence the empowerment of Generation X and the evolution of their lifestyles.

Generation Y (1981-2000): The education of Generation X and Generation Y in Thailand was governed by the National Education Plan of 1977. Under this plan, public schooling is free until Prathom 6. Consequently, children were enrolled in elementary school at the age of six and attended for six years. However, the generation y is likely to access to the education because Thai governments has made improvements to the education system in rural areas. This includes the rapid expansion of technology and communication, which has made learning more convenient and accessible through various channels. Importantly, it has been found that Thai-So women recognize the value of education. As a result, they have become more aware of the necessity of sending their children to school than before.

The value of education in the Thai-So community was constructed by outsiders and other people's success. The outsiders, in this context, were government employees.



The interviewee shared that the dream job for Thai-So women was becoming a government employee, as they viewed it as a straightforward and honorable occupation. In addition, witnessing an educated individual from the community succeed in their career appeared to motivate other members of the community to pursue their studies. Therefore, it was expected that Generation Y individuals were encouraged to continue their education at various levels, based on the financial support their families could provide. The interviewees displayed various opinions about education, which are described in the quotation below:

“...We got the chance to work outside the village because of education. We can work at a factory and make money because of it. It improved the thinking capabilities. Education gives us the power to negotiate. We can decide by ourselves. Education has allowed some of us to become a government officer...” (K. Dueanpen, Personal Communication, October 2, 2023; P. Uipitak, Personal Communication, October 3, 2022; K. Yaibangkaew, Personal Communication, August 26, 2018).

Moreover, it was found that there were differences in the educational levels of Thai-So women across three villages. In Nonghoynoi village, most Thai-So women had completed education ranging from Prathom 6 to Mathayom 3. In Kokmoung and Photipaisan villages, women’s education levels ranged from Mathayom 6 to vocational school, high vocational school, and even bachelor’s degrees, indicating greater access to higher education opportunities. Notably, Thai-So women in Photipaisan village achieved the highest educational levels, followed by those in Kokmoung and Nonghoynoi villages. Also, the educational data correlated with the career paths of Thai-So women in each village. In Photipaisan village, the majority of Thai-So women held positions as government employees (at the municipality, sub-district, and the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative (BAAC)). Conversely, Thai-So women in Kokmoung village worked predominantly in factories, while those in Nonghoynoi village were primarily employed as laborers.

The findings also indicated that education empowers Thai-So women in Generation Y. The details are provided below.

Decision-making in Household: due to access to education and the ability to earn a livelihood, it was observed that Thai-So women from Generation Y influence in household



decision-making and family negotiations. An illustrative example comes from the interviewees who mentioned K. Yaibangkaew's sister. They highlighted that she graduated from the Faculty of Nursing at Khon Kaen University. After working for approximately 3-5 years, her family situation improved gradually. She managed to build a house and send money to her parents every month. Naturally, she had decision-making authority in the household due to her successful career and financial contributions to the family. In cases involving couples, the interviewees emphasized that if there were issues within the household, husbands would often defer decision-making to their wives. This was because the wives, having a deep understanding of the problems, were considered more credible in making decisions related to the family. (M. Bunpan, Personal Communication, October 22, 2022; J. Oumsaphon, Personal Communication, October 23, 2023; V. Voragun, Personal Communication, October 24, 2023).

Control of Use of Income: the findings revealed that the income earned from work ranges from 7,500 to 15,000 baht per month. The researchers provided specific examples related to individuals' incomes.

S. Pairachsong (Personal Communication, August 27, 2023) graduated from the vocational school at Sakon Nakhon. Upon graduation, she worked as a factory worker in Bangkok with a basic salary of 9,000 baht per month, reaching 15,000 baht with overtime. P. Uipitak (Personal Communication, October 3, 2023) graduated from Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University. After graduation, she worked at the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative (BAAC) in Kusuman district, earning a monthly salary of 12,000 baht.

K. Dueanpen (Personal Communication, October 2, 2022) graduated from Mathayom 6. While furthering her studies at the vocational school, she works as a Dental Assistant at the Community Hospital, earning a salary of 7,500 baht per month.

Regarding the utilization of their income, they tended to spend their money more freely when they were single. Upon marriage, they became more cautious about their expenditures. Nevertheless, they could earn for themselves, including sending remittances to their family. Therefore, they had the power to control the use of income.

Empowerment through Labor Migration. Labor migration has been a significant driving force behind the empowerment of Thai-So women across generations. However,



the process of empowering women has gradually evolved, starting with their participation and eventually leading to them making decisions side by side with men. The details of labor migration and empowerment are outlined below.

Baby Boom Generation (1946-1964): Thai-So culture in the period of baby boom generation did not allow Thai-So women to work far from their home. Comparing three villages, the findings showed that Thai-So women in the Photipaisan village migrated to work to a greater extent than the women in Kokmoung village and Nonghoynoi village. The reason for working in another area was due to a lack of money, even though they worked in farming. Consequently, labor migration was an alternative so that they could make money. They would migrate to work after they had been married for around 1-2 years. Bangkok, industrial Estates and Chumphon province in Southern Thailand were their usual destinations. According to their labor migration experience, they felt that they were more accepted from their husband. The details were explained via the empowerment's indexes as mentioned below.

Decision-making in Household: after they had worked along with their husbands, it was found that the wives had more participation in making decisions because they played an essential role in making money. During that time, the salary was 1,500 baht per month. As for household expenses, the wives could decide because the men did not have the time. K. Voragun (Personal Communication, December 20, 2022) exemplified as mentioned in the quotation mark:

“...After I earned money for myself, I could decide about food and clothing. For example, when I bought rice at the market, I had to think whether 5 kilograms would be enough for 1 month or not...”

Decision-making in Agricultural Production: after working together, Thai-So women became more actively involved in agricultural production. According to the interviewees, they gained knowledge about the use of fertilizers, chemical pesticides, and the cultivation of cash crops. Additionally, it was observed that the women increased their participation in cultivating new cash crops, particularly rubber trees. An illustrative example is K. Voragun (Personal Communication, December 20, 2023), who shared her experience of increased involvement in agricultural production. She recounted that approximately five



years ago, her husband decided to return to their home in Nonghoynoi village. After being back for 2-3 years, they recognized the similarity in climate between Songkhla province and their village, leading them to consider cultivating rubber trees locally. They promptly planted around 10 rai of rubber trees, and three years later, they started earning income by harvesting latex. Presently, they generate 300-400 baht per day from the latex of their rubber trees.

“...My husband and I used what we learned in Southern Thailand on our own land. He said the soil and weather here are just like Chumphon, so we decided to plant rubber trees. Now, after seven years, we can finally tap them.”

Control of Use of Income: while the women earned income through their collective labor migration, decisions regarding building a house, purchasing land, or acquiring a motorcycle supported with the men rather than the women. Consequently, women faced limitations in accessing loan sources because all properties were registered under the men’s names. Official documents, such as title deeds for both the farm and the house, as well as car registrations, were in the men’s names, granting them legal legitimacy. Thai-So women held a strong belief that men were capable of effectively managing all the properties. Over time, it was observed that a few husbands allowed their wives to own properties; however, such cases were rare in the study area.

Generation X (1965-1980): The findings revealed that Thai-So women aged 33-47 (Generation X) had opportunities to work outside their villages, with most starting migration around the age of 15, often encouraged by relatives. They migrated to Bangkok, major industrial estates, Ayutthaya, Rayong, and Songkhla, typically working away from home for 15-25 years. This exposure introduced them to mainstream culture and diverse social networks, broadening their worldview. Importantly, migration influenced social norms: Generation X women were among the first to challenge the traditional expectation of marrying only within the Thai-So community, instead forming unions with partners from other provinces such as Ayutthaya, Mukdahan, and Sisaket. These experiences show that labor migration not only provided income but also shaped women’s personal choices and gradually shifted cultural practices. To assess the empowerment effects of these changes, the researcher analyzed the data using women’s empowerment indexes.



Decision-making in Household: the findings indicated that women were able to make immediate decisions on daily household tasks such as food preparation, dishwashing, laundry, cleaning, healthcare, and household expenses. Another important finding concerned children's education. In the Baby Boom generation, this responsibility was traditionally assigned to men, but among Generation X women, it gradually shifted to them. The main reasons were that men were occupied with farming and community ceremonies and trusted women's ability to manage their children's education, partly because of the communication and problem-solving skills women had developed during labor migration. Although Generation X women could now decide about children's schooling, they still consulted their husbands on major matters, reflecting that women's decision-making power had expanded but was still shared within the household.

"...My husband is too busy with farm work and taking care of the animals, so he doesn't have time to handle the children's education." (P. Phosanlee, Personal Communication, December 9, 2022)

Decision-making in Agricultural Production: in agricultural production, men played the primary role, handling tasks such as preparing the land, lifting rice into the barn, spraying insecticide, contacting merchants, selling crops, and selecting cash crops. They also managed problems like crop failures or natural disasters. Nevertheless, women were not completely excluded from decision-making. For example, M. Kusuwan (Personal Communication, August 11, 2023) shared that her husband frequently consulted her on farming plans. They discussed how much land to use, ultimately deciding to grow 15 rai of rice for sale and 15 rai of sticky rice for household consumption, as well as when to sell livestock such as buffalo and cows.

"...My husband said the cow and buffalo prices were low. I told him not to sell this year since we have enough money and can wait until next year." (V. Rasangphram, Personal Communication, October 14, 2022)

Control of Use of Income: after participating in agricultural decisions, women were often responsible for collecting household income, which came from rice cultivation, cash crops, and livestock. However, major financial decisions still depended on men as the recognized 'breadwinner' and 'head of family.' Before marriage, women could



freely manage the money they earned during labor migration, but after marriage, decision-making shifted primarily to husbands. Still, some women participated jointly in decisions, especially on large purchases. For instance, when a husband wanted to buy agricultural equipment such as a water pump, he would explain the reason, and the decision would be made together (T. Namna, Personal Communication, October 20, 2022; V. Rasangphram, Personal Communication, October 14, 2023; R. Yaibangkaew, Personal Communication, August 10, 2022).

“...My husband spoke about buying an agricultural water pump. He told me that there was not enough water this year. The rice in the paddy fields will be damaged. He will use the water pump to provide water for the farm...”

Generation Y (1981-2000): Referring to the previous issue (Education), it was shown that the majority of Generation Y had studied. Hence, it was not unusual that almost all of them had migrated to work outside their village. Mostly, they were factory workers while a few of them were laborers. They began to work after they graduated from Mathayom 3, Mathayom 6 or the vocational school. At present, some are still working away from home, while others are returning home. One main cause that made them decide to return home – boredom. The details relating to women empowerment in generation Y will be explained through those indexes as mentioned below.

Decision-making in the Household: the interviewees suggested that the power for making a decision in the household depended on both the man and woman. If it was a general issue, the wife can decide not to ask or to consult with her husband. The general issues were food preparation, dishwashing, laundry, cleaning the house, family member’s health care, children’s education, etc. They further explained that they were trusted by their husband because they could handle the family problems.

“...My husband gives the household power to me. He trusts me because we find the money together and I have life experience from labor migration...” (P. Yaibangkaew, Personal Communication, October 15, 2022).

Decision-making in Agricultural Production: in fact, Thai-So women, in particular Generation Y, did not have enough agricultural knowledge when compared with Generation X and baby boomers. The main reason came from the social values of education.



The interviewees tried to explain that they were taught to do other careers (such as government officer, factory worker, etc.), not as a farmer. Farming was seen as a miserable job with an unstable income. Therefore, they were supported to study further at least until Mathayom 3. They headed for an Industrial Estate and to Bangkok because it offers higher-paying jobs and a more convenient lifestyle. They may spend approximately 10 years, or more, working away. After deciding to return and work at home, most of them started farming. Of course, they had no knowledge of agriculture. These women and their husbands lacked agricultural knowledge, and once they returned, farming became the only profession they could pursue. Therefore, they had to make decisions together (K. Dueanpen, Personal Communication, October 15, 2022; K. Yaibangkaew, Personal Communication, August 10, 2023; M. Bunpan, Personal Communication, August 10, 2023).

Control of use of income: women who returned home after migration often brought new ideas to improve household income. For example, S. Pairachsong (Personal Communication, August 27, 2018) shared that she and her husband discussed ways to earn more beyond farming and decided to take a loan of about 500,000 baht to buy a tractor. This investment allowed them to earn additional income by plowing fields for other farmers in their village and nearby areas—though the price per rai recently dropped from 350 to 300 baht due to the economic downturn. Other women introduced new initiatives such as raising turkeys, expecting them to generate future profit. These examples show that women actively contribute to income generation and participate in financial decision-making for their households (K. Kauai, Personal Communication, July 24, 2023; S. Pairachsong, Personal Communication, June 17, 2024; S. Plad-in, Personal Communication, July 23, 2023).

## 5. Discussion

This study provides deeper insights into the dynamics of women's empowerment within the Thai-So ethnic group by analyzing the dual roles of education and labor migration. The findings reveal that these two factors are mutually reinforcing but operate differently across generations. While education provides long-term foundations for empowerment, labor migration offers more immediate access to income, independence,





and broader social exposure. Together, they form the pathways through which women negotiate power in a structurally patriarchal setting.

This study reveals that education and labor migration operate as complementary drivers of empowerment among Thai-So women. Education lays the foundation by enhancing communication skills and access to opportunities—most evident among Generation Y (Inui, 2015; Galindo-Silva & Herrera-Idárraga, 2023)—while labor migration delivers immediate income, practical skills, and social exposure that translate into greater bargaining power (Eryar et al., 2019; Bachan, 2018). When integrated, they accelerate the shift toward more collaborative decision-making and challenge patriarchal norms, positioning women as active agents of change within their households and communities.

To further understand these dynamics, the study draws on indicators adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Alkire et al., 2013, pp. 71-91) to examine empowerment across four key dimensions: household decision-making, agricultural production, income control, and access to productive resources. While the original WEAI framework offers a valuable foundation for assessing women's empowerment in agricultural contexts, this study applies its indicators with adjustments to reflect the socio-cultural specificities of the Thai-So ethnic community.

1. Household Decision-Making: Women with independent income—especially migrants—reported greater participation in household decisions, including education of children, health care, and family budgeting. This is most apparent in Generation Y, where gender relations are more collaborative. These findings reflect Li and Stodolska's (2022) argument that economic contributions enhance domestic authority.

2. Agricultural Decision-Making: Men still dominate agricultural decisions, yet women—particularly those with urban work experience—have gained a consultative role. Among Generation X and Y, joint decision-making is gradually replacing male dominance, suggesting an ongoing cultural shift in gender roles.

3. Control over Use of Income: Migration and education both enhance women's ability to earn and control income. Generation Y women, in particular, have used their earnings to invest in farming equipment or small-scale businesses, reinforcing their bargaining power in the household.



4. Control over Productive Resources: Despite progress in other domains, access to land and property ownership remains limited for women due to deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Productive assets are commonly registered under male names, indicating that structural barriers still restrict full empowerment.

As discussed above, the WEAI framework has provided a useful basis for analyzing empowerment across domains such as household decision-making, agricultural production, income control, and access to resources. However, while WEAI offers valuable metrics, it may fall short in addressing the socio-cultural complexity of rural ethnic groups like the Thai-So. To fill this gap, the study introduces a complementary conceptual model - the “Three-Layer Empowerment Model” - which is further elaborated in the section on new knowledge contribution.

## 6. Suggestions

Based on the findings, the recommendations are divided into two main aspects: Policy-Level Recommendations: The government should promote women’s access to land, credit, and productive resources. In addition, training programs on property management, financial literacy, and legal rights should be provided to strengthen women’s decision-making capacity.

Community and Individual-Level Recommendations: Local authorities should support the establishment of Thai-So women’s groups to encourage knowledge sharing and advocacy. Furthermore, workshops on entrepreneurship and agricultural innovation should be organized to help women returning from migration create sustainable income and improve their livelihoods.

## 7. Knowledge Assets

This research introduces the “Three-Layer Empowerment Model,” offering new insights into women’s empowerment among ethnic minority groups. Unlike conventional frameworks such as the WEAI, this model integrates cultural structures, individual agency, and context-specific outcomes within a patriarchal society.



As illustrated in Figure 1, the model consists of three interlinked layers:

1. Structure: The socio-cultural context of patriarchy, ethnic norms, and family systems.
2. Agent: The individual's ability to negotiate power through education, income, and labor participation.
3. Outcome: Observable changes in decision-making roles, income control, and economic innovation (e.g., joint investment in farming tools).

This model extends the analytical lens by recognizing empowerment as a process of negotiation, not just an outcome, and is particularly useful in studying underrepresented groups with unique cultural systems. It can also inform targeted policy interventions for rural ethnic women across Southeast Asia.

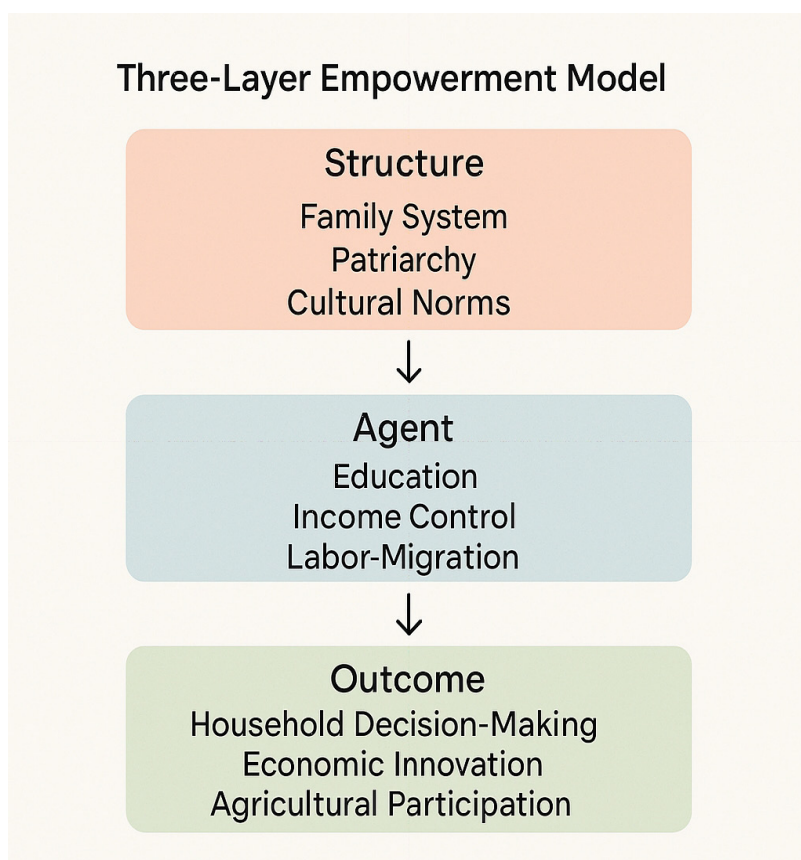


Figure 1 New knowledge



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