

Remittances and the Changing Roles of Women in Laos

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Abstract—Prior to 1975, women in Laos suffered from having reduced levels of power over decision-making in their families and in their communities. This has had a negative impact on their ability to develop their own identities. Their roles were identified as being responsible for household activities and making preparations for their marriage. Many women lost opportunities to get educated and access the outdoor work that might have empowered them to improve their situations. So far, no accurate figures of either emigrants or return migrants have been compiled but it appears that most of them were women, and it was women who most and more frequently remitted money home. However, very few recent studies have addressed the relationship between remittances and the roles of women in Laos. This study, therefore, aims at redressing to some extent the deficiencies in knowledge. Qualitative techniques were used to gather data, including individual in-depth interviews and direct observation in combination with the content analysis method. Forty women in Vientiane Municipality and Savannakhet province were individually interviewed. It was found that the monetary remittance was typically used for family security and well-being; on fungible activities; on economic and business activities; and on community development, especially concerning hospitality and providing daily household necessities. Remittances played important roles in improving many respondents' livelihoods and positively changed their identities in families and communities. Women became empowered as they were able to start commercial businesses, rather than taking care of (just) housework, children and elders. Interviews indicated that 92.5% of the respondents their quality of lives improved, 90% felt happier in their families and 82.5% felt conflicts in their families were reduced.

Keywords—Laos, Monetary Remittances, Social Remittance, Women's Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

LAOS occupies an area of 236,800 square kilometers and is located in the centre of Mekong region, being surrounded by Burma, Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam. The population of Laos is about 6,521,998 with 3,234,569 men and 3,287,429 women (July 2007, estimate). The population is young: 41.2% are aged 0-14 years; 55.7% are aged 15-64 years and 3.1% are aged 65 years and over [1].

According to one study [2], prior to 1975, women in Laos were mostly involved with household management and child care, for example, water collection tasks which might require 2-3 hours a day, husking rice for family consumption, milling rice and caring for the sick and the elderly. Meanwhile, girls were to assist their mothers with these chores and the care of younger siblings. Women were not generally able to access the means required to increase their labour productivity and lacked skills training in agriculture. Instead, they

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were taught sewing and cookery. The Government of Laos (GoL) has promised since 1975 to realize equality between men and women in all fields, political, economic, cultural and social, and to do away with all acts of contempt or oppression toward women.

Until 1992, Lao women had still far from achieved parity with Lao men in the areas mentioned. Some had achieved greater levels of access to education and employment than in 1975 but women's social status and political representation has remained low. Women made up 52.8 percent of the active labour force (15-44 year olds) in 1985. They are involved in various sectors including agriculture, handicrafts, commerce, public health and education and industry. Nonetheless, the major responsibilities of women were again largely confined to childcare and housework. These tasks require numerous hours of work each day in addition to women's work outside the home and yet their domestic labor continued to be excluded from labour force statistics, as also happens in most countries. Further, they were expected to prepare themselves for their marriage rather than get educated or access the outdoor work that might have empowered them to improve their economic circumstances. The above findings indicate that women in Laos have suffered from having reduced levels of power over decision-making in their families and outside the house. This had a negative impact on their ability to develop their own identities.

From 1975 to 1990, [3] observed that an unknown number of Lao people took refuge and migrated overseas to countries with better economic conditions, such as Thailand, China and the west. So far, no accurate figures of either emigrants or return migrants have been compiled but it appears that many if not most of them were women and younger than 20. Various studies have indicated that remittances were mostly sent by women migrants. However, the recent studies have not addressed the relationship between remittances and the roles of women in Laos.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

It is anticipated that the findings from this study will represent useful evidence and empirical facts about how remittances influence the roles of women in their families and their personal development in Laos. This study has primarily explored three objectives: (1) purposes and uses of remittances, (2) how remittances change the roles of women in the family, (3) how remittances contribute to the improvement of women's lives in the community.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Migrations and Remittances

Before addressing roles of remittances, it is interesting to identify reasons why Lao people migrated to other countries and why the migrants remitted money to their home countries. Southiseng and Walsh [3] illustrated findings regarding reasons for migration from Laos. Several reasons encouraged Lao people to migrate to other countries: because of political problems; for work; for further study; for improving their second language ability (especially English), which is considered to be one of the most important abilities in obtaining a job Laos at the moment; migrating (especially to Thailand) to follow a partner; being convinced by friends, relatives

and job brokers; ease of movement and better prospective economic circumstances. Economic motivations seemed to dominate the migration decision. Many expected to be paid more in other adopted countries. For instance, in Thailand most of the men found work in the fishing and construction industries, in factories, construction sites and sugar cane and rubber plantations. Women most commonly worked in factories, restaurants, entertainment venues and the sex industry. A majority of the young women and girls from rural provinces were apparently moving back and forth to and from Thailand. Many of the girls felt it was their duty to take care of their parents and their siblings. Consequently, their intention was to earn as much money as possible to remit to their families and so they were often willing to take almost any paid job.

Regarding the number of Lao migrant workers in Thailand, as estimated by the Lao Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, there were about 300,000 Lao workers in Thailand with about 30% having officially registered in 2006 [4]. Reference [4] interviewed 117 Lao migrants (50% men and 50% women), of whom 40 had been working there for less than three years in Thailand. It was reported that 95% of Lao migrants remitted money back to their country of origin, with a minimum of 600 baht (US\$19.35) and maximum of 96,000 baht (US\$3,096.77) during the years 2003-2005. Women remitted more or more frequently than men. 94% of the respondents affirmed that the money remitted back home had positively changed their livelihood. Most commonly (32%) remittances were spent on daily needs, followed by (19%) housing/home improvement. The rest went on varied activities like transport (cars, motorbikes, bicycles), buying land, household durables (TVs, refrigerators), health, education, buying tools or machines for production (durable goods), investing in business, income-generating activities, investing in agriculture, livestock, paying debts, savings and others.

B. Remittances and Women's Development

Reference [5] found that there are various types of remittances, for instance, monetary remittances and non-monetary remittances (including technological transfers, social remittances or ideas, skills and knowledge obtained by the migrants, collective remittances or else.). Reference [6] differentiates the terms of monetary remittance and social remittance. The term of 'remittance or monetary remittance' usually refers to monetary transfers. It is defined as the portion of a migrant's earnings sent from the migration destination to the place of origin. Some refer to monetary remittance as 'migrant worker remittance' - meaning cash transfers transmitted by migrant workers to their families and communities back home. Social remittances are usually defined as the ideas, practices, identities and social capital that flow from people of one country to another.

There are plenty of studies which have investigated the amount of remittances which were remitted to the origin country of migrants but have largely omitted the migrant's well-being or the contribution of remittances [5]. The studies generally attempted only to maximize the amount of remittances sent. Olsen furthermore added that:

"Women were increasingly involved in international migration for economic necessity and in the sending, receiving and managing of remittances and were thus critical players in the connection between migration and development. Despite women's important and growing role, very few studies have analyzed the relationship between gender, migration, remittances and development" [5].

Olsen demonstrated more in his research in Peru. Women had more opportunities to invest remittances in productive enterprises such as tailoring, producing handicrafts, commercial agriculture and raising cattle. Meanwhile, Dominican Republic preferred to send

remittances to women instead of men. That suggests that women appear increasingly to take part in sending, receiving or managing remittances. However, this raises the issue of what to do to make those women's identities be recognized and how to involve them in the development program.

In Laos, Lao women have been organized at the local, provincial and national levels through the Lao Women's Union (LWU) – a fundamental organization with a membership of more than one third of the female population [2]. The LWU has focused its attention specifically on women's concerns. The LWU's slogan has three goods and two responsibilities. Women are encouraged to be good citizens, good mothers and good wives. Women are expected to seek employment outside the home and to actively participate in national construction and defence. The Union is presently involved in several activities to promote women's interests, combat female illiteracy, train women in general health care, hygiene, child/natal care and nutrition; educate women in time saving technologies and provide skills training for income generation. Generally, being members of LWU, women obtain privileges such as being the first to be considered for appointment to jobs and promotions and priority in becoming leaders and so on. For example, to become political members or leaders in government sectors, women are required to have membership of the LWU. Besides the LWU, the GoL has cooperated with various international organizations to set up projects to promote women's interests, such as training in farming, livestock, mother and child, health care, birth spacing, silk handicraft, components for women in forestry projects, institution building of the Lao Women's Union and so forth.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative technique was principally used to gather and interpret the obtained data and the findings of this study are mainly based on empirical results. The authors used individual in-depth interviews, direct observation and content analysis methods to identify and analyze data. The key informants (respondents) of this study female returnee migrants, female migrants and female family members (who have been remitted money to/ have remitted to their families of origin, or who have brought social remittances back to their home country). The key informants were based in Vientiane Municipality (the capital city of Laos) and Savannakhet province of Laos. These are two of the 18 provinces of Laos in which the issue of emigrants as refugees has become a political issue in recent decades, as well as many migrants for economic purposes and other related issues have emerged [3].

Both secondary and primary data were used in this study. In addressing the three primary objectives identified above, forty respondents were interviewed in person. The respondents were diverse in ages, education background, jobs and types of senders/recipients of remittances in accordance with the principle of maximum diversity [7]. The respondents were selected in accordance with convenience, networking and snowballing techniques. A semi-structured interview agenda was used. The interview agenda consisted of three parts: respondents' profile, remittance profile and roles of remittances. All interviews were conducted in the Lao language and interpreted into English for the purposes of analysis. The authors have successfully used this and similar techniques in other research projects (e.g. [8], [3], [9]).

Respondents were encouraged to participate in a discussion in which they were able to talk extensively about the use and roles of remittances. The interview was not limited to the prepared agenda but was open-ended and encouraged additional comments from the respondent. Data collection and analysis took place from the end of March to the end of April, 2010. Extensive notes were taken during each interview and these were subsequently transcribed for analysis. The content analysis method was used to analyze the obtained data in compliance with an interpretation with anonymity protection for

academic purposes [10].

V. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Demographic Details

All 40 respondents were women; 12 were based in Vientiane Municipality and 28 were based in Savannakhet province. They had Lao nationality (while 4 had originally had Vietnamese nationality). One fourth was single. The respondents were categorized into five age groups. Ten respondents were aged above 60 years old; 9 were aged 51-60; 8 were aged 31-40; 7 were aged 41-50 and 6 were aged 30 or younger. This age profile is slightly older than the generally youthful population of Laos, as mentioned above.

The respondents of this study comprised of five groups. Most (27) of the respondents said that they got remittances from abroad. Five respondents had been working overseas and had remitted to their home country; another five respondents had remitted while they were studying abroad; one has been working abroad for more than 20 years but did not make any remittances; one had oversea studying experience and never sent monetary remittances to the home country, and the remainder did not specify their circumstances. This suggests that most respondents had some more or less reliable ideas and facts regarding relationship between remittances (either monetary or social remittances) and women's roles to share.

The respondents had various educational backgrounds: most (30) of them had finished high school or lower; five held graduate degrees; four had vocational certificates and one had an undergraduate degree. The respondents are currently engaged in distinctive jobs. The largest number (15) of respondents was self-employed and their ages were mostly around 41-50. They were commonly involved in self-run or family-run businesses such as selling vegetables and fruits at the market, nail painting, running restaurant at home, selling food, snacks and drinks at schools, cooking and selling snacks and desserts at the market, opening small grocery stores or otherwise working at home. A total of 14 respondents have been working in the organized private sector, government sector, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) or International Organizations (IOs). Meanwhile, 11 of them were unemployed and were aged above 50 (3 were aged 51-60, and 8 were aged above 60 years old). They said that their daily jobs involved housework and that it was reasonable for them to retire.

B. Respondents' Remittance Profile

When the respondents were asked to which country they had been and whether they went there for work or study or if they had remitted to their family in the country of origin, 16 answered that they had been to Australia, America, Canada, Japan, France and Thailand (some are still there), 8 said that they were there to pursue their further studies, while the remainder had been working there and some were doing both. Nine respondents answered that they had been overseas for less than 5 years; 5 had been there for more than 10 years and 2 had been there for 5-10 years. For those who studied and remitted, their typical fields of study were business management, management of information systems, regional development program, land management, finance, human development and international development. All were awarded scholarships from cooperation between the GoL and the host universities.

For those had been working abroad, they were mostly factory workers in electronic assembly or garment industries, waiting staff in restaurants or sales assistants in boutiques shops. Only one respondent had been a civil servant. Four respondents said their monthly average wage was between US\$1,000-2,000; two that their wage was less than US\$500 and only one respondent got a monthly average wage of between US\$ 2,001-2,500. The remaining respondents declined to discuss their wages for reasons of irregular

working hours, dependence on spouse, unemployment status or student status.

Talking about recipients of monetary remittances, five respondents who worked overseas generally remitted to their parents, siblings and nieces/nephews. The other five respondents who studied overseas said that they only remitted to their parents. The recipients answered that sources of their monetary remittances were siblings, children, in-laws and nieces/nephews who had been staying abroad, such as in America, Australia, Canada, France, Japan and Thailand.

Talking about remittances, the most common form of remittance is the monetary remittance, although there were some forms of social remittances. In this study, most (38) of the respondents said that the remittance senders certainly improved their networks and their second language ability; 37 respondents also believed that the remittance senders had improved their practical working skills and felt more confident in their jobs and 36 felt that the remittance senders were more patient as they had become accustomed to the stress of working in a different environment and culture. Finally, 27 respondents believed that remittance senders had obtained and improved their technical knowledge and skills as some of them had studied in or were involved with high-tech industrial workplaces.

Regarding the channels by which monetary remittance transfers took place, the most commonly used was the bank service, which was the answer of 27 respondents. Further exploration revealed that it is more convenient to access the banks; since the service and transferring fees were relatively cheap; the bank transaction was safe, it was fast and possible to keep track of transactions and, certainly, the procedures of depositing, withdrawing or transferring transactions at the banks had been simplified. A 48-year lady, who was self-employed, selling snacks at the market in Savannakhet province, said that:

"My sister and cousins normally sent the monetary remittance through the bank, especially through the Western Union. They went to and transferred money at the bank using Western Union service. After that, they called and told me the transfer codes. I could get cash at any bank where the Western Union was available after showing the transfer codes and my identification card. Within an hour or two I could get the transferred cash. It is much easier than earlier, when it took almost a week to transfer and withdraw remittance via the banks."

Apart from the bank channel, 20 respondents said their cousins frequently chose to send money through friends, cousins or relatives who were travelling back to the home country. Meanwhile, 15 respondents said their relatives or cousins preferred personally to bring and give them the money whenever they went back to visit their families in the home country, while two opted for the post because of convenience and because they had network connections there. As a result of this, it is clear that the accurate figure of remittances in Laos can not be recorded.

When asked how much was the average amount of money remitted, 21 respondents said the average amount was typically US\$300 or less per time; 11 received around US\$301-600 per time; two received around US\$601-900; three received around US\$901-1,500; and the others declined to answer this question. In this matter, the frequency of monetary remittance was also probed and 28 respondents declared that remittances arrived a few times per year, whereas four respondents got monetary remittances every 2-3 months, four received money monthly and the others once a year. These figures for the amount of monetary remittance and the frequencies of monetary remittance transfers suggest that monetary remittances might not have much influence on households with medium incomes in the current economic situation in both Vientiane

Municipality and Savannakhet province but may have a large influence on low-income families. This issue was investigated further: from 38 responses, a majority (20) of respondents replied that the monetary remittance helped contribute to their personal and family development to the extent of about 20% of total budget or less, while 10 said that they had relied on the remittance for about 21%-40% of their budget and seven said that the monetary remittances played critical roles in their lives, accounting for more than 50% of total income. Further, two respondents said that remittances accounted for 61%-80% of their total budget and another two that remittances accounted for 81%-100% of their income. It may be borne in mind that a majority of the respondents of this study did not rely on the monetary remittance so much because most of them were either employed in some sectors aforementioned or self-employed of their micro/home-based businesses.

C. Uses of Remittances

Remittances were used for a variety of purposes and these have been grouped into four categories: (1) use of money for family security and well-being; (2) use of money for fungible activities; (3) use of money on economic and business activities; and (4) use of money on community development. These findings are described in the following paragraphs.

1) Use of money remittances on family's security and well-being

38 (95%) out of the total 40 respondents observed that they had used the money in this category. Firstly, 92.5% out of 38 valid respondents said that they used the money to a moderate extent in buying food and household equipment and paying for utilities. One respondent said that "... the remittance is largely seen as additional income from a relative, brother or sister, which are sent to families in their homeland for domestic household consumption and other utilities. So, some remittances from abroad are an important source of income that could help the low income families in different ways for better living. Some could also use the remittance to invest in productive activities such as on agriculture, trade activities, etc."

Meanwhile, only 2.5% did not use any of the remittance on this activity because it was saved and kept in case of emergencies. Further, 75.5% of respondents had moderately the money spent on medical and hospital matters, for instance paying for their (parents') medicines when they became sick or went to hospital. Other respondents declined to use the remittance for this activity because their family was small and the members were still young and rarely got sick. Here is the statement of a 50-year housewife who used most of the remittance on medical and hospital costs:

"All my sisters and brothers are staying in America. They regularly send money to me, about US\$2,000 a year. The money mostly pays for my parents' hospital costs, and of course that was the main purpose of the remittances of my brothers and sisters. The remittance helped us a lot in saving our personal earnings for other purposes, rather than just paying the medical and hospital bills of our old parents."

Additionally, 70% of respondents accepted that they spend little on education for themselves, their children, spouses and grandchildren. Some 30% said that they had paid part of the money on their family's debts, such as paying a down payment on a motorbike and family borrowing for urgent household maintenance. On the other hand, most (65%) of the respondents said that they never or only seldom had any debts. This fact actually appears to be common in Laos as the Lao people commonly use cash (not credit cards) and rarely have debts if this can be avoided. In urgent cases, people mostly approach their cousins or relatives to borrow money at

no interest rate and with a flexible date for re-payment, especially in the case of commercial purposes (Southiseng *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, remittances in this study were rarely used to repay debts. Finally, although 65% of 38 respondents agreed that they spent little of the remittance on maintaining household equipment, 30% disagreed.

2) Use of money remittances on fungible activities

Out of 38 (95%) valid respondents, 77.5% accepted that remittances were sometimes used to contribute to preparing and organizing religious activities (funerals, ceremonies, weddings, etc). In addition, 60% and 50% noted that they sometimes used a small portion of remittances on family vacations or other activities or else as allowances for children when they went to school or university respectively. A further 27.5% used part of the remittance for agricultural activities at home such as raising chickens, ducks and pigs and growing vegetables and fruit and so on, although a majority (67.5%) did not keep live animals at home. One woman in her early forties observed that:

"I used the remittance that my daughter remitted to me in buying and raising cows. Now I have two cows. I don't want to spend money on useless things as I know that my daughter has been working hard to earn it. I plan to raise the cows, sell them later and save money so that my daughter doesn't need to send money to me often. Or, if she plans to return home and settle her family in Laos in the future, she can keep doing this agricultural activity as another part of her income."

This woman clearly used the money for a commercial purpose. She even added that apart from investing the remittance on this productive agricultural activity, she has also saved part of the remittance to construct a room for renting. Again, all has been prepared for her children and daughter who has been accompanying her spouse to stay in America. She said an investment of the remittance was for her daughter if her daughter and her family planned to stay in Laos in the future. Briefly, not many of the respondents had such an obvious business-oriented vision. However, this is a good example to learn from for those who hope to not depend on remittances.

3) Use of money on economic and business activities

Most respondents observed that remittances were a part of their capital investments on economic and business activities. In fact, 55% used the money for operational capital for their business such as paying for electricity and water supply utilities, employees' wages and others. Meanwhile, 47.5% stated that the remittance was somehow used for transportation so that the business can access outside markets, target markets and suppliers. A lady who sells vegetables and fruits at the market in Savannakhet province said that:

"Well, the remittance I have received is just about US\$ 200-300 per year. It is not much. It is sometimes spent for petrol for my motorbike. Sometimes it pays for a tuk-tuk or pick-up car when I need to take large amounts of vegetables to the market."

Another woman said: *"I am now a member of the sales team that sells exercise outfits for a company in Thailand. I often spend some of the remittance for my transportation, such as paying for petrol, paying for the bus or air ticket and taxi in order to go to attend a meeting and meet customers in other areas."*

A further 42.5% and 40% had invested the remittance on some equipment, machinery or other assets for their self-run businesses, as well as starting-up new micro-businesses, mainly based at home. A 58-year woman who made wax candles at her home said that she spent the money that her daughter had remitted on her little business - paying for the cotton thread, wax, plastics bags, oil, knife, tables, chairs and other items. She added that even though the remittance was small, it enabled her to start-up her micro-business in combination with her talent and personal skills. She enjoyed doing it and felt more relaxed in having something to do rather than just being retired. Furthermore, she said that she had added value to the remittance, which helped her to not to disturb her daughter too much. Another 45-year woman who opened a home-based shop, selling soft drinks, sweets and desserts, said:

"I used the money to build rooms on my land for renting to others. The remittance is not just money, but it is very valuable to me and my family because it comes from my daughter's effort. She works hard there and spends her life in an unfamiliar environment and culture. So, before spending it, I need to consider carefully. So, I firstly try to save and eventually I can build the room for rent."

She pointed out gently and proudly what she has been doing. Last but not least, it appeared that 20% of the respondents had also spent the remittance for getting authorization to run ventures, renting spaces, as well as other necessary fees. These findings indicate that the recipients of remittances did not rely on that money but most of them have been attempting to increase the value of the remittances through productive activities and business investment. This means they have recognized the importance of the remittance even if the amount of what they have obtained is not that big. It appears that some women in Laos have business-oriented perspectives and they were enabled to transform their perspectives into action in some ways as long as they have some capital to start-up the business. They are also grateful for the efforts of those who sent the money and did not wish to pester them too much in the future and, so, try to make the most of the money.

D. Use of money on community development

According to the interviews, respondents also contributed part of the money to community development. A majority (67.5%) of respondents said that they had contributed some small part of the remittance for the celebration of the Pathet Lao Party, women's international Day, Labour Union Day and so forth each year. As many as 65% replied that they had also used their remittance to pay their membership fees in the community, such as for women's union, life assurance (or funeral expenses) scheme and other village-level schemes. When respondents were asked whether they spent money on the security of the village, 62.5% said that they did but only to a small extent. Finally, 60% noted that they also contributed remittance money to community activities such as cleanliness and tidiness.

All in all, according to these findings, most remittance money was used on family security and well-being, followed by economic and business investment.

E. Use of Social (knowledge/experiences) Remittances

Besides the use of monetary remittances, this study also investigated how the social (or knowledge/experience) remittances of the respondents were managed. More than 65% of respondents rejected using social remittances on any activity in their lives. However, the others used social remittances a little in four common practices. Out of the 38 valid respondents, 32.5% said that they had applied their obtained knowledge/experience remittance to adapt

themselves to living more comfortably in the local society. Others said their knowledge/experiences gained from abroad were useful in advising friends, relatives and others to start-up and improve their businesses and definitely, in their main jobs, 27.5% and 25% of respondents respectively. Alternatively, 22.5% said their knowledge remittance was useful in starting-up their own businesses. The reason that social (knowledge/experiences) remittances had not been used by respondents more widely is that few received them.

VI. HOW REMITTANCES CHANGE THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Again, 38 (95%) of the total respondents shared their views regarding how remittances changed the roles of women in their families. 92.5% of respondents agreed that the monetary remittance moderately helped improve their livelihood in the community, while 80% said it moderately helped empower them to become involved in managing and making decisions concerning households and families. 65% accepted that it somehow enabled them in sustaining and expanding their own businesses. At least they had money to contribute to operational costs. 62.5% said that it enabled them to afford transportation to go working or make contacts outside the home and that those remittances helped them to get opportunities to study and improve their knowledge, according to 50% of respondents.

Regarding social remittances, most (more than 67%) respondents said they were not relevant to any activity in their lives. However, the others said they had a certain positive influence on their lives. A minority, 27.5%, believed that social remittances helped them to some extent to gain trust from friends, colleagues, boss or family as they had been abroad and absorbed more information and this gave them better bargaining power than before. Apart from this, 25% acknowledged that the social remittances also partially helped them get better jobs, work well in their jobs, get more network connections and friends and caused the community positively to recognize their identities.

This suggests that the more network connections and friends, broader information and education that respondents have, the better the opportunities and positive identity formation in the family or community they can obtain. That is one contribution of remittances that respondents can not reject.

VII. REMITTANCES AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

In terms of the role of remittances in women's development in the community, 92.5% of respondents noted that remittances did contribute to an improvement in their quality of life, while 90% said the remittances had positive roles in strengthening happiness in the family, 82.5% that the remittances helped reduce conflicts in the family and, finally, 65% agreed that the remittances increased socio-economic disparity from those families who received remittances and those who did not.

One of the respondents who admitted the positive role of remittances pointed out that she mostly relied on the money to help her family's quality of life improve. Without this, she believed that her daughter might not get the opportunity to continue her studies since her family had only low income. Consequently, she accepted that the remittance somehow generated a difference from those families without remittances. Some respondents said that at least there was hope that they still had certain potential sources of income to which they might gain access. Their children, cousins and other relatives were able to remit them money when it was urgent.

For those who received social remittances, they said they had obtained valuable working experience, educational qualifications and these gave them opportunities to choose better jobs. A 24-year old

woman who had been working as a sales assistant at a boutique shop in Thailand proudly declared during the interview that:

"I feel happier when I can make my parents and sisters happy. I feel proud that I can contribute some of my energy and earnings to my mother's micro business. Such an amount of money at least is able to give her help when it is needed."

During the interview, it was clear that the respondent looked happier when her mother agreed that she felt more secure when her daughter remitted money to her. Although the money was not very much, she felt more secure nevertheless. Another 42-year woman added:

"Thanks to the remittance received from my sister. I do not do any business, I am a government officer, but the remittance is more than valuable to me. More than 10 years ago, the remittance helped me and my family to acquire our own house."

Briefly speaking, either monetary or social remittances have played critical roles in the lives of women either in the family or community or even at the workplace. It is a key part of various factors help the respondents feel happier, reduce conflict and improve the quality of their lives. Remittances even help raise the roles of some respondents in society. They have helped to create and nurture some identities and sense of worth.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, it can be seen that remittances can be useful for both senders and recipients. The monetary remittance was typically used on family security and well-being; on fungible activities; on economic and business activities; and on community development. In particular, in the use of remittances for family security and well-being, it was largely used for hospitality and daily household activities. Meanwhile, social remittances often helped recipients to adapt themselves appropriately to the local environment. Some recipients of social remittances utilized ideas, knowledge and experience to advise friends, relatives and others to start-up and improve their own businesses.

Remittances played roles in improving many respondents' livelihoods and positively changed their identities in the family and the community. Women are empowered in that they can start commercial businesses, rather than just taking care of housework and caring for children and elders. They become involved in decision-making processes in the family and in managing household finances. They have become the recipients and managers of remittances and determine whether to spend them on the household or else saving or investing the money in productive activities. Sometimes the remittance was used to contribute to the operational costs of respondents' businesses when necessary. It helped the sustainability of the business. Respondents who received remittances often made productive use of them and tried not to depend only on future remittances. In this respect, it appears that remittances empower the respondents to take on new responsibilities, especially in terms of entrepreneurial activities, which helped them become self-employed. This reinforces their roles and bargaining power at home and in the local community. At least some women in Laos are now empowered and can obtain chances of doing business and receiving education and they do not need to prepare themselves purely for housework or marriage.

Remittances also played many important roles in women's personal development. Respondents confirmed that it helped improve their family lives, enabled them to become involved in making decisions at home, provided more opportunities to study, enabled

more trust from friends and others and helped promote obtaining more network connections. Few if any negative effects of remittances were found in this study (apart from the possibility of contributing to income inequality between families within a village).

One respondent recommended using and managing monetary remittances efficiently by saving and investing the money carefully. This reduces the possibility of future dependency and also provides more gratification to the migrant workers who feel that their efforts have not been expended in vain.

Remittances do have the effect of binding the recipients and their communities more closely to international markets, as well as leading to aspirations for consumer goods and services. This change is generally associated with breaks from traditional modes of living and this has both advantages and disadvantages for the people affected.

Social remittances also provided empowerment in some cases by helping in choosing preferable jobs outside the home, bargaining for their wages, getting more networks and certainly becoming more familiar with their rights. This helped them to become more independent and able to contribute their own ideas to community development. They can suggest their own ideas and experiences with others, especially ideas about improving business performance and start-up businesses in Laos and this may also contribute to employment development in local communities.

The Lao Women's Union at the village level exists to protect and promote roles of local women and, to support this union, it is suggested to set up a co-development program at the LWU to coordinate better with remittance recipients and senders in sharing ideas about remittance management, setting priorities and maximizing the use of the remittances. This program should cooperate with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and One District One Product (ODOP) programs which are available in order to stimulate women's motivation in entrepreneurship and to use their existing talents. This might enable the reinforcement of the role of both the local LWU and ODOP. In the meantime, the social status of the remittance recipients could be improved as their networks expand and they can contribute their remittances for community development. The co-development program may establish saving groups among participants to educate them how to save and become productive or even to invest and create local products services at the local community level.

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