



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Emotional Labor: Struggle and Negotiation of Lao Female Service Workers in the Northeastern Region during the 2000s-2010s

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 22, 2024 Accepted: Jul 3, 2024	<p>This article presents the historical story of the struggle and negotiation of Lao female workers who worked as service workers in the economic system of the Northeastern region of Thailand during the 2000s. The lifestyle of these Lao female workers is part of the economic, social, and political changes in the Northeastern region. However, in the past, their stories were rarely mentioned in academic circles, especially in historical and social-economic studies. The study discovered that as Northeastern civilization evolved into an entrepreneurial or semi-rural-semi-urban society, and Lao laborers came to work and had a significant role in propelling the local economy. However, because of legal restrictions, most of these workers were foreigners, service women in nightclubs, and had illegal immigration status. As a result, the local community detested, hated, and exploited them in numerous ways. Meanwhile, they have a number of ways to respond and adjust, like changing how they feel about offering sex services, changing their looks, learning and using different techniques to appease clients such as speaking and singing Thai songs, and learning how to refuse to provide sexual services. Additionally, it was discovered that Lao female laborers used tourist passports to avoid being arrested by Thai government officers. Lao female workers want to marry in order to transition from sex workers to small entrepreneurs in the economic sector, including the entertainment sector, grocery sales, and service shops selling and repairing various consumer goods and household items that are growing in the Isan community. The recollections should be preserved and not forgotten from Isan history, rather than Isan or Thai society remembering these Lao female laborers as a place to "vent their emotions" or as "others" who are not Thais in Isan society.</p> <p>This article seeks to answer the essential subject of how Lao female service workers have fought, negotiated, and reacted to changes in the Northeast's economy, politics, and society during the 2000s. This should allow Isan society to better understand the way of life of Lao workers, creating space and the presence of Lao female workers in historical academic circles that have been forgotten and never mentioned, especially in Isan historical academic works.</p>
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### INTRODUCTION

After Laos (the Lao People's Democratic Republic) changed its economic structure to a socialist system in the decade following 1977, significant transformations occurred in its development. Essentially landlocked, Laos evolved into a nation that was more connected to other countries within

the Mekong River Basin. Accordingly, there was an influx of foreign investment, and natural resources within the country were harnessed and transformed to attract foreign investor interests. In particular, this included projects related to mining, dams, and power plants, aligning with the vision to make Laos the "Battery of Asia." This was part of the Lao government's ambitious goal to alleviate domestic poverty by 2020.<sup>1</sup> However, the above-mentioned developments have had profound impacts on the resources and people of Laos. Even those in the highland ethnic groups, who traditionally centered their livelihoods on land resources, saw disruptive changes. Land previously used for subsistence or traditional agriculture was transformed into commercialized agriculture or contract farming, intensifying market-oriented production. These shifts have significantly eroded the stability of life in rural areas across the country. As a partial consequence,<sup>2</sup> there was an increase in the migration of young Laotian laborers to Thailand.

During Thailand's economic crisis, known as the "Tom Yum Kung crisis," in the early 2000s, many Thai entrepreneurs faced a potential collapse. This crisis led to a decline in businesses, skyrocketing unemployment, and many workers returning to their original hometowns. However, these returning workers did not necessarily rejoin the agricultural sector as before, as they considered it "dirty, dangerous, and difficult" (the three Ds). Instead, many of them utilized the experience gained from selling their labor to establish themselves as owners of small-scale trade and service businesses. They initiated these ventures using their savings, low-interest loans from local financial institutions, and loans from village funds supported by the government. During that time, it was expected that these funds would become crucial financial support for the villagers. Consequently, this period witnessed a significant increase in rural entrepreneurs.

The expansion of small-scale entrepreneurs has extended across all regions, including the northeast and Thai Lao border areas. This is particularly evident in the food and beverage business, resulting from the development plan for the Mekong River Basin supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The ADB aimed to transform the border areas of the subregion into economic hubs for member countries, aligning with Thailand's government policy of "turning battlefields into marketplaces." Consequently, the Thai-Laos border areas are being transformed into gateways for tourism in the Mekong River Basin. A part of this policy has created conditions that turn border areas into tourist destinations capable of attracting people from around the world to visit the Thai-Lao border region. For instance, the U.S. magazine 'Modern Maturity'<sup>3</sup> mentioned Nong Khai Province as the 7th most desirable place to live globally.

Furthermore, it has been observed that border areas also serve as cultivation grounds for various economically significant crops and supply industrial factories. These crops include eggplants, pepper, corn, rubber, and tobacco. This has significantly contributed to the income of farmers in the border areas. These farmers have become crucial customers for the restaurant/entertainment establishments clustered along the Thai-Laos border. A subset of these eateries is known as "karaoke lounge." In addition to providing food to customers, some of these establishments also offer young women opportunities to engage in conversation, serve drinks, and, in a significant number of cases, provide sexual services. Most young women come from various regions of Laos, entering and working in the Thai border area through social networks involving relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

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<sup>1</sup> Pandope Tangsriwong. (2012). *Lao Land Link: New Imagination*. Bangkok: Nam Aksorn Printing. Introduce.

<sup>2</sup> Wasana La-ongpliw. (2015). "From Rice Fields to Rubber Plantations: Agricultural Landscape Changes in Highland Communities in Luang Namtha Province. Laos: Amid Development Competition and Modernization." in the book "Contesting Development and Modernity in Laos." edited by Chayan Wattanaphut and Soimat Rungmanee. Chiang Mai: ASEAN Studies Center. Chiang Mai University. Page 45.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Treasury. (2013). Treasury Office of Nong Khai Province. Nong Khai Province Information. Retrieved on October 1, 2023: <https://nongkhai.treasury.go.th/en/about>.

Due to legal constraints and their non-Thai status, these Lao female workers face oppression, discrimination, and disdain from the establishment owners, customers, and community where the bars and eateries are located. This is mainly because they are perceived as non-Thai, discreetly entering the town, and are seen as contributing to the erosion of morals and safety in Thailand. This perception is exacerbated by the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STI) among male customers and can be a cause of marital dissolution. The marginalization, suppression, and stigmatization of these workers significantly diminish their human dignity. However, despite these challenges, they do not endure the oppression. Instead, they learn, resist, and negotiate with the prevailing power structure continuously over time, leveraging available resources and resilience. This article attempts to answer an important question: Amidst the development and changes in the Northeastern region (Isan) in terms of economics, politics, and society during the decade of 2007, how did Lao women workers in the service sector negotiate and adapt to the changing trends of Isan society. This should allow Isan society to better understand the identity of Lao workers. It creates a space and presence for Lao female workers in a historical field that has been forgotten and has never mentioned them, especially in academic work on Isan history.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are numerous studies in the literature on the struggles and negotiations of women engaged in the service industry in Thailand. However, a proper place to start the initial literature review is the work of Suliman (Nuramon) titled "Glass Cabinet Women: A Study of the Transformation into Thai Masseuses."<sup>4</sup> This study provides perspectives and analyses that reveal the relationship between masseuses and the environment in various service establishments. It connects their backgrounds and life experiences as masseuses with the external world and service environment. The work illuminates the surroundings of massage and spa establishments, including bathing and body massage rituals, and various characters and groups within these establishments. It also explores important rules and regulations of the industry. A crucial aspect highlighted in this academic work is the depiction of the steps and processes women undergo before becoming professional masseuses. It underscores the transformative journey these women embark on to adapt to their new profession long before they can identify themselves as "professional massage therapists."

While similar in nature, another notable work is the study by Sopida Virakulthawan,<sup>5</sup> which explores the presentation of the identity of women working in entertainment and beer bars in Chiang Mai province. The portrayal encompasses the lives of bar girls in Chiang Mai who undergo three distinct phases of adaptation. The first phase involves their initial entry into the workforce, requiring adjustments to their perception of the work they engage in and personal development to align with their roles. They also undertake responsibilities as caretakers for foreign guests. In the second phase, there is a process of learning and self-development through work, including negotiation, customer evaluation, and the overall enhancement of future relationships. The third phase involves the transformation of relationships, transitioning from being bar girls to becoming involved romantically, with two possible outcomes: achieving success or returning to the 'emotional roller coaster.' In this phase, women have more experience and options, not confined solely to relationships, placing expectations on a single man.

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<sup>4</sup> Suleeman (Nuramon) Wongsuphap. (2001). "Beautiful Glass Dolls: A Study of the Transformation into Thai Masseuses." Bangkok: Siam Publishing.

<sup>5</sup>Sopida Wirakulthewan. (2000). "Presentation of the Identity of Female Service Providers in Beer Bar Entertainment Establishments in Chiang Mai Province." Master's thesis in Social Development, Graduate School. Chiang Mai University.

The literature related to female Lao labor entering the services and sex industry in Thailand includes that of Nettadao Thaotawil,<sup>6</sup> the author of a narrative description of cross-border sex work through the eyes of Lao women in Thailand. It presents a profile of human trafficking that is different from the mainstream image, in that women are not kidnapped, deceived, or forced into the process. Instead, it relies on social conditions, namely the social networks and economic conditions of the country of origin, which act as a magnet, that drawing Lao women to willingly cross the border to work in the Thai sex industry. This option is considered better than staying at home, as it provides both good income and the ability to keep their vocations hidden from the family and home community. At the same time, engaging in sex work is seen as temporary employment that can lead to an improved status and also serve as the "good daughter" role as she remits a portion of her earnings her relatives back home.

The qualitative research mentioned above (and others like it) is highly beneficial academically, especially in showcasing courage and resistance against oppressive power imposed on women. These women learn, adapt, and survive in strength. However, a limitation of these studies is that they still emphasize and present only the negotiation and struggle of female labor within the entertainment industry. These studies portray a static image, limiting women's passive role of service workers in the entertainment sector alone. In reality, these female workers continually adapt and connect themselves to changes in the outside world, especially the Lao women workforce, which adjusts to the changing conditions of the socio-economic transformation in the northeastern region of Thailand, as it transitions into a peri-urban or entrepreneurial society<sup>7</sup>.

### **Objectives**

To study the negotiation patterns and struggles of Lao female labor in the services sector within the changing economic, political, and social landscape of the Thai Isan region from 2007 to 2016.

### **Informant group**

This study investigates the lifestyle of a group of Lao female workers who have experience working in the service sector, especially in restaurants, drinking establishments, and singing services, including some who also sell sexual services, in the northeastern region of Thailand. During the time of study, some of them were still working in this field, while some of them had already quit working, but still lived in Thailand because they had families in Thailand. Reaching out to this group of people is really challenging. The researcher had to rely on knowledge and connection with these female workers, who have been working on issues of access to health and basic rights for migratory communities in the Northeast since 2007. The following factors made it possible for Lao female workers to supply the relevant information for this study: For this study, seven Lao female workers with expertise in the service sector in the northeastern region volunteered to contribute data.

### **CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study delves into the socio-historical exploration of the Isan region by examining the experiences of "Lao female laborers" who were employed in the region during the 2000s-2010s. The research adopts the "History from below" approach, which is influenced by Marxist ideologies that focus on studying mass movements and marginalized groups, particularly the oppressed lower-class individuals who are often neglected in historical narratives. Additionally, the study underscores the significance of "Oral History" as a method of collecting evidence through structured interviews and

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<sup>6</sup> Netdao Thaotawil. (2006). Cross-Border Sex Trade: Experiences of Lao Women in the Commercial Sex Sector at the Thai-Lao Border. *Journal of Social Sciences*. Faculty of Social Sciences. Chiang Mai University. 18(2). pages 169–202.

<sup>7</sup> Attachak Sattayanurak. (2016). *Luem ta a pak chak 'chaona' su' phuprakopkan'* [Doing alright; from 'farmer' to 'entrepreneur']. Bangkok: Matichon.

data documentation. The information gathered from primary and secondary sources, in both written and oral formats, is meticulously analyzed to assess the credibility of the evidence. The analysis aims to uncover historical truths and present them cohesively in alignment with the narrative and research objectives.

### **Research Ethics**

Since the informants are a vulnerable population, this study emphasizes and recognizes the importance of human research ethics, which are principles and guidelines used in conducting research involving humans. This is to ensure that the research is ethical and does not harm or damage the research participants, as well as to prevent abuses of their rights and dignity. The research was carried out as follows:

1. Respect for Persons: Before collecting data from informants or participants, this study provides extensive information to let them decide whether to consent to provide information. This includes explanations and a free consent form.
2. Beneficence: To decrease the risks and disadvantages associated with the research, this study uses pseudonyms rather than the informants' or participants' true names.
3. Integrity and Transparency: This study was examined by experts and data representatives to guarantee that the information is as useful as possible to academic and social workers.

### **RESULTS**

#### **1. The lifestyle of Lao female laborers in the service sector of the Northeastern region (Isan) of Thailand**

The lifestyle of Lao female laborers in the service sector in the Isan region is discussed next in the context of two dimensions: cross-border migration and the daily life of Lao female workers, as well as the process of engaging in 'emotional labor' in the sex industry.

#### **Cross-border migration and the daily life of Lao female workers**

Impact of development in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS.) over the past five decades has brought significant changes to the Isan region<sup>8</sup>, transforming it into a peri-urban society anchored by provincial and regional cities. There has been a proliferation of various types of small-scale entrepreneurs in the economic sector including the services industry, which has become a crucial source of employment for Lao female laborers. Particularly noteworthy is the services sector within bar/restaurant establishments, a subset of which is "karaoke lounges," which increased attract young women from all regions of Laos to work as hostesses.

The cross-border migration of Lao women to work in karaoke lounges in the Isan region was influenced by a complex mix of factors and conditions. Some studies highlight the role of being a "good" daughter in directly contributing to the family's financial status. This role stems from a system of persuasion through a patriarchal culture in which men are the authors and dictate the growth of women according to a worldview defined by men. Additionally, there are issues such as unemployment and media influence, especially television, which present the prosperity of the Thai side of the border. There are also shared socio-cultural conditions that contribute significantly to encouraging Lao female labor to cross the border to seek work and a better income in Thailand.

The first-time journey of Lao female labor into the Isan region, particularly in the services sector, often involves guidance, persuasion, or assistance from acquaintances, relatives, or close friends originally from the home community. These individuals, often acting as mentors, may be siblings or peers, leading and encouraging Lao female workers to travel to Thailand for employment. Some Lao female workers are picked up by prospective Thai employers who travel to villages in Laos, scouting for recruits. These employers typically follow the advice of Laos already employed in their own lounges. In some cases, the recruiter is the wife of the restaurant owner who actively seeks young,

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<sup>8</sup> The northeastern region of Thailand

attractive women in Laos. For instance, there is the case of "Eiw" (assumed name), a young woman from Hinbun District in Khammouane Province, who journeyed to work in the services sector in Thailand. She was recruited by a lounge employer who traveled to her hometown, picked her up, and brought her to work in the Muang (capital) District of Nakorn Phanom Province.

"A woman from my hometown returned from Thailand with her husband, and they came to inquire about my current employment status. They asked if I had a job and, if not, if I would be interested in working at their restaurant/lounge in Nakorn Phanom. They mentioned that the pay was good and that meals would be provided for free. The job they offered was as a waitress in the restaurant. Since I had no other commitments at the time, I decided to accept their offer and go with them. I felt comfortable trusting the woman as she was from the same village, and we were like distant relatives. Without consulting my parents, I made the decision to join them, and two other girls from the same locality also decided to accompany us."<sup>9</sup>

Upon entering Thailand, most employers provide free accommodation. Meals, mostly consisting of rice and fish, are often provided and additional dishes are sometimes available. If there is something specific one wishes to eat, they can use their own money to buy it and prepare it with friends or co-workers. In fact, monthly wages from working waitress in a restaurants are relatively low, ranging from 1,000 to 3,500 baht (per week or month?). However, as a hostess in the Karaoke lounge, a young woman can earn extra income by socializing with male customers, which can generate lucrative tips. Additionally, there is earnings from drink orders, where each type of beverage ordered by customers incurs a service charge. This service charge is generally around 30-50 percent higher than retail sales, and the hostess can earn a percentage of that mark-up as an incentive. This includes earnings from food orders of customers, where the waitress/hostess typically receives a flat rate of around 10-20 baht per order. That said, the majority of the customers came to the karaoke lounge to drink alcohol rather than dine.

When ordering food and drinks at these establishments, after the main order is placed, the service staff will ask to sit with customers as companions. Customers were required to pay an additional 100 baht for this seating service. Once seated, these companions may request a soft drink. If customers permit, they can enjoy complimentary alcoholic drinks, and, as noted, customers usually tip their companions when they leave. In total, the income that Lao female workers receive as service providers in a typical Karaoke lounge ranges from to 3,000-7,000 baht per month. A strategy for some hostesses is to entice regular customers (e.g., weekly, bi-weekly,) since it can provide a more predictable and steady income. According to the interview with Eiw, before becoming the owner of the establishment she works in, she said that the income was good. The establishment initially paid a monthly salary of 1,000 baht, but over time, the salary increased, along with earning additional income from tips and drink commissions, enabling Eiw to save money to return home. In total, she could send approximately 2,500-4,000 baht back home each month.

"The income is as the employer stated when first recruiting us to work at the lounge, or approximately 1,000 baht per month. However, there is another type of income added, which includes tips and additional commissions when customers order drinks and meals. Our responsibility is to assist customers in placing orders for food and drinks at the establishment, including handling the hostess' seating fee, which is usually around 100 baht per hour. This fee is pooled with the other hostesses and divided equally between us at the end of the workday. That income ranges from 150-300 baht per person per night. This income, although not substantial, needs to be shared with our colleagues. Nevertheless, it is sufficient for both the owner of the establishment and ourselves, and we must collaborate to make ends meet."<sup>10</sup>

The daily routine of Lao female workers in the karaoke lounge sector seems to be repetitive, with little variation. They typically wake up at approximately 10-11 in the morning. Afterward, they attend

<sup>9</sup> Eiw (assumed nicknames): Interviewed on January 5, 2020

<sup>10</sup> Eiw: (assumed nicknames), Ibid

to personal matters, get dressed, and have a brunch. Subsequently, they assisted in cleaning and preparing food prior to the opening hour. Some establishments have housekeepers who handle preparations, making it easier for Lao female workers. After finishing brunch and completing chores, they can take a break, relax, and chat inside the establishment, but they rarely leave, even though they are free to travel outside. When customers arrive, the hostesses must provide companionship, engage in conversation, and serve food and drinks until the establishment closes. Most establishments are closed around midnight or 1 a.m., depending on local ordinances.

Apart from providing companionship and serving food and drinks, a significant number of Lao female workers in bars, restaurants, or Karaoke lounges choose to freelance in commercial sex or accompany customers on "picnics." The price of these services varies, ranging from approximately 700 to 2,000 baht per time, depending on the negotiated agreements between the customer and the Lao female worker, and there is usually no intermediary involved in these negotiations. However, suppose the customer takes a hostess out of the establishment during operating hours, the owner typically levies a "bar income" (e.g., 300 baht), and the rest will be what the workers will get.

Therefore, engaging in sexual services is not merely a matter of altering or adding features to the service itself. Rather, it involves an internal paradigm shift of the meaning of "girl" or "woman," and a shift in the understanding of what needs to be done. This includes creating pathways of hope, and all these processes are intricately interwoven and performed as a formalized part of the work of Lao female labor.

### **The process of becoming 'emotional labor' in the commercial sex industry**

Becoming emotional labor in the sex-for-hire sector is particularly abnormal for average Lao young women. In the case of the Karaoke lounge hostesses in this study, the Lao woman typically has her first commercial sex encounter with a Thai male customer whom she has become acquainted with or attracted to. These customers often seek more than sex; they also appreciate the companionship and emotional support provided by that a compliant hostess. That said, expectations for pleasure from the service sometimes lead to instances of coercion, pressure, and exploitation client's happiness by the provider, who may be transformed into "emotional caretakers." This characteristic does not differ much from the profit-driven exploitation seen in various other types of labor within the capitalist system.

In these situations, the young Lao female in these situations is compelled to accept her role as a significant "commodity" in the traditional cultural meme of a patriarchal society. This role emphasizes duties within the household, including managing the household, caring for children, taking care of the husband, and being subordinate to the husband's demands for sex. These attributes and expectations are ingrained in Lao male perceptions of women, who are taught and conditioned to serve as "caretakers" or individuals whose role is to bring satisfaction to others. If there is an internal conflict, the Lao woman must learn to suppress and display dissatisfaction. On the other hand, Lao men believe that demanding these things from girls and women is a natural part of being male. Women are thus conditioned to fulfill roles such as being a mother, wife, and daughter, with a crucial common characteristic being a "caretaker." Accordingly, Lao female laborers adapt these attributes to accommodate their new identity in the role of provider of "emotional labor," where they serve as temporary caretakers and provide emotional services to male Thai customers. This occurs within the context of the relationships between men and women in domains related to emotions, love, and sexuality.<sup>11</sup>

Lao female labor or service workers who make the daring leap into commercial sex can be broadly categorized into two main groups. The first group comprised those who came to Thailand with a

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<sup>11</sup> Sopida Wirakulthewan. (2000). "Presentation of the Identity of Female Service Providers in Beer Bar Entertainment Establishments in Chiang Mai Province." Master's thesis in Social Development. Graduate School. Chiang Mai University. P. 72.

specific objective of selling sex. The second group consists of those who decide to engage in sex work after first coming to work as a waitress or hostess in establishments, such as the Karaoke lounge in the Isan region. The relationship between these two groups of female labor involves the transfer of learning and adaptation processes from the first group to the second group.

The first group of Lao female laborers comprises those who travel to work directly in the sex industry. This group generally had prior marital experience, often with responsibilities for their dependent children, for example, after separation from the children's father. Some had previously worked in Thailand in various occupations and, after separating from their spouses, decided to return to Thailand to sell sex to resolve financial constraints back home. Typically, these women come with friends or acquaintances who have been working in commercial sex and provide coaching during their initial period of work. According to one of the in-depth interviews, Keang explained that before deciding to sell sex in Thailand, she had worked in the southern region of the country in the rubber plantation sector. After splitting with her husband, she returns to her hometown in Laos. However, with responsibilities for two young sons and aging parents, she decided to cross the border to work in a Karaoke lounge with a friend who encouraged her to go, aware of the commercial sex requirements, but compelled by the conditions of supporting her two young sons and taking care of elderly parents. In the words of Kaeng:

"Before working in Karaoke lounges, I used to work in Thailand's southern region, specifically in Chumphon Province, doing hired work in rubber tree plantations. The employers would subcontract us to rubber plantations for the arduous labor of tapping the trees to extract the raw latex. During that time, the employer had my husband and me stay there as 'family members' for two years. We traveled to various provinces for work. After encountering problems with my husband, who is also Lao, we both decided to return home. Later, we separated because he became involved with another woman. I was saddened, but life had to go on because I had responsibility for both elderly parents and my toddler sons, who were enrolled in primary school grades Prathom 2 and 4. We needed money for household expenses, so I tried to find a solution. I had a friend working in a restaurant in Thailand, so I reached out to her. She told me about her job in Roi ET Province, in a restaurant with accommodation and free meals. The job involved serving food and, sometimes, allowing customers to take us out for paid sex. I already knew that was the trade-off. Still, the income would be enough to live on, and it was totally voluntary, without coercion. Even though some may frown on this practice, it is better than staying at home with no viable employment and dependents to support. I've been doing this for about six months now."<sup>12</sup>

The second group consists of those who decide to engage in commercial sex after first coming to work in other sectors of Isan. Typically, these are younger women, aged around 18 years, who travel with relatives or friends already working in or familiar with karaoke lounges in Thailand. Many of these teenage girls were not initially aware that working in a Karaoke lounge eventually involved commercial sex. Upon learning about the job requirements, some decided not to continue this work and chose to travel home to Laos or find alternate jobs. However, many others chose to engage in sex work because of the significantly higher cash compensation compared with regular employment. For example, the life of a hypothetical woman, "Fan," a young lady from Pak Ka Ding, Bolikhamxai Province who, after a broken relationship, fled Laos to work in Karaoke lounges with friends in Ban Phaeng District of the border province of Nakorn Phanom. Initially, Fan did not engage in sex work, but after seeing her friends doing it and realizing how she could rapidly double or triple her income, she made a transition. Her friends were from a group that had previously worked as 'emotional laborers.' In Fan's words:

"I arrived in Thailand in 2012 to work after a failed romance. My friends, who were already working there, encouraged me to join them. Initially, I hesitated because I was still in a relationship with my boyfriend. However, after the breakup, I felt I had nothing to lose by moving to Thailand. Initially, my

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<sup>12</sup> Kiang (assumed nicknames): Interviewed on March 4, 2020



job involved working as a hostess, serving and chatting with male customers. Over time, I realized that the income was not sufficient. I observed that my Lao friends were making much more money by engaging in commercial sex in addition to their hostess work. Seeing their success, I decided to try it myself. This way, I could earn enough money to send back to my relatives in Laos. Many young Lao women come to Thailand with the primary goal of supporting their families back home. Staying in Laos and sacrificing for a Lao boyfriend did not seem to offer any benefits. Therefore, I made the decision to work as a hostess and also engage in commercial sex on the side, following the example of my friends."<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the transition from hostess to sex worker is not something that can be accomplished overnight. Lao female workers who choose to go through this route must first undergo various appropriate processes. For example, young women require adequate coaching from their peers or shop owners. The main orientation process occurs during idle times, when there are no customers. Simultaneously, on-the-job training occurs during working hours and is memorable as it involves learning through actual practice, similar to masseus training. Lao women learn how to be solicitous (consider using concerned) to customers, phrases to use in conversation, and negotiating skills (for the price of sex and conditions, for example, condom use). Training also encompasses how to deal with customers and cope with societal prejudice related to commercial sex.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Lao women who choose to work in "beer bars" with mostly foreign patrons must undergo training and learn behaviors and Basic English language skills to appear more refined. Women have to learn and adapt significantly to their work, including adjusting their thoughts about selling sex and steeling themselves against stigma if they are seen in public with a foreign man, who is usually much older. They must continually remind themselves that what they are doing is 'work,' creating a new sense of value that leads to economic benefits for themselves and their family, rather than viewing serial sexual relationships as a function of personal desires. Additionally, they must learn about or evaluate older Caucasian ("farang") customers who approach their services through conversation, introductions, or 'courting' before deciding to engage in sex for pay. Another crucial aspect that women cannot afford to neglect is self-grooming skill enhancement and attitude adjustment.<sup>15</sup> These various learning and self-transformation processes appear to be similar to those undertaken by both groups of emotional laborers, whether they work in a Karaoke lounge with Thai customers or beer bars with Western foreigners.

Key and preliminary changes in the process of adapting to becoming an emotional labor in commercial sex include adjusting one's attitude toward commercial sex.

The general perception of sexual intercourse is considered an activity with the goal or purpose of bonding and reproduction and is meant to be carried out between individuals in a romantic relationship or marital covenant. If such activities occur outside of these boundaries, they are viewed as morally objectionable. When faced with this moral dilemma, many Lao female workers either return home or seek alternative employment. Young Lao women who travel to Thailand feel that working conditions in the entertainment sector will involve the opportunity (as well as pressure) to sell sex. That said, after arriving in the Isan region, some of these women may remain morally opposed to sex work. Over time, however, some women succumb to a pressure and freelance culture when the potential monetary benefits outweigh the moral repulsion. They are able to resolve this cognitive dissonance by viewing commercial sex as merely a job and a means to an end, not as a desire for promiscuity. This adaptation can empower these women to support dependent family members back home and thus reward the woman for her sacrifice. For example, key informant "Fan" shared

<sup>13</sup> Fan (assumed nicknames): Interviewed on June 10, 2020

<sup>14</sup> Suleeman (Nuramon) Wongsuphap. (2001). "Beautiful Glass Dolls: A Study of the Transformation into Thai Masseuses." Bangkok: Siam Publishing. p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> Sopida Wirakulthewan. (2000). "Presentation of the Identity of Female Service Providers in Beer Bar Entertainment Establishments in Chiang Mai Province." pp. 77-87.

her experience, stating that it took considerable time and persuasion before she could accept the idea of selling sex. She constantly reminded herself that she was doing it for the economic goal of providing a comfortable life for her family back home.

"It wasn't my first time being involved intimately with a man. However, in previous instances, it was within romantic relationships where we were partners, and the feelings and thoughts were different. I loved them and willingly engaged in intimate activities. Yet, when it came to being intimate with a man I had just met in a restaurant, someone I had only known for an hour or two, it felt strange. Initially, I was hesitant and afraid. Friends tried to reassure me, saying that I was there to earn money, to work. I had to partition and distinguish between conflicting emotions. I couldn't mix affection with work. I didn't engage in this work to fulfill carnal desires or personal needs. I had to be responsible and think about the people waiting behind me, expecting me to support them. I had to endure difficulties for the comfort of dependent family members. With this mindset, I made the decision to work in commercial sex, and I don't regret my choice."<sup>16</sup>

The shift in the meaning of engaging romantically with men, from love, desire, or another form of emotional connection to a meaning of 'working,' not only allows for the continuity of emotional labor but also serves as a framework to rationalize and buffer the emotional pain arising from deviating from the norms of Lao female workers in these contexts.

Changing the perspective of commercial sex is related to learning and self-development in providing emotional services with quality. These processes must go hand in hand, and include improving or changing one's personal image.

The process of enhancing one's image is considered a form of professional grooming when entering the service industry in karaoke lounges. This is often influenced by verbal instructions, learning-by-doing, and modeling after experienced colleagues. It involves enhancing external appearance by maintaining fair skin, a slim waist, a petite figure, long hair, large breasts, and a charming smile, along with wearing modern stylish outfits. Customers who visit often refer to them in slang as 'YLG' (young Lao girls). These feminine traits are in demand, as they contribute to the allure that attracts customers to the establishment and, in part, leads to an increase in commercial sex. These external characteristics can be enhanced to meet the desired standards if the budget is sufficient. Therefore, besides seeking income to return home, some of these workers also allocate a portion of their earnings for self-improvement and image enhancement. These aspects were learned and adapted by Lao female workers in the role of service providers throughout their time working in the Isan region. In the case of "Gam," a young woman from Sawannaket Province, she attempted to enhance her charm by embedding imitation diamonds in her teeth to capture the attention of customers, where she worked as a hostess and potential sex partner:

"After working in Isan for about three months, I felt the need to earn more money to send back home. I was curious about how to attract customers and build a loyal clientele like others in the area. Seeking advice from my friends, they suggested that I should dress more stylishly and improve my physical appearance, particularly focusing on skin and eye makeup. Initially, I was hesitant, especially about the eye makeup, as it felt unfamiliar to me. However, I decided to follow their advice, considering my friend's successful experience and income. The enhancements proved to be beneficial as they made me feel more confident and attractive. Subsequently, I noticed many of my friends' getting gemstones embedded in their teeth (not real diamonds). Intrigued by their cute appearance, I also wanted to try it. My co-workers complimented me, saying my bejeweled teeth looked adorable (laughs). This made me feel more beautiful and boosted my confidence, especially when interacting with male customers."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fan (assumed nicknames) ,Ibid

<sup>17</sup>Gam (assumed nicknames): Interviewed on March 5, 2020

The improvement or change of one's image is essential, considering the customers who seek emotional connections from emotional labor. This is reflected in the training on how to take care of customers.

'Taking care' of customers is a fundamental skill that service workers must learn, as it transforms the strengths of Lao female labor into a significant selling point, which is the role of being an attentive and submissive 'caretaker.' Originally, women used this skill to care for immediate family members. However, when working as service personnel in the entertainment industry, they must take care of unfamiliar men who are not their husbands, lovers, or relatives, requiring them to make critical cognitive adjustments. These adaptations include improving Thai language proficiency, engaging in heart-to-heart conversations, serving solicitously, negotiating/rejecting requests or services, and evaluating customers. This learning process typically involves receiving instructions from the establishment owner. However, most Lao working women in Isan learn from co-workers and have direct experience through trial and error. "Gam" said that, besides self-improvement, one crucial skill in Karaoke lounge work is customer care. This means understanding man's needs, how to engage with them seductively, and handling situations where a customer may not be interested or willing to go with them for sex. These are aspects that they need to learn, sometimes from the owner but mostly through practical experience and insights from their co-workers. In the words of Gam:

"In the beginning, I didn't know much about anything. I had to listen to the owner, serve customers, and sit quietly without talking. Initially, all I could do was smile because I was afraid of making mistakes. I observed my co-workers and paid attention to their actions as soon as customers entered. My first task was to ask customers how many seats they needed and then provide place settings and menus. I had to memorize the menu items and be able to make suitable recommendations. Following that, I observed and learned how to engage and entertain customers, as well as how to encourage them to order more drinks, which meant more income for me through commissions. Every new experience at work taught me something. There were instances when I encountered aggressively flirtatious customers, and I had to play along despite finding it distasteful. I had to stay alert and keep learning continuously because success in the job involved maximizing income and ensuring our safety."<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, as customer caretakers, emotional labor workers, especially Lao women, need to create protection against being objectified racially. This involves training in areas related to emotional work, such as the language spoken, the songs sung, and the confidence in performing the job.

Training in Thailand is essential. Although the Central Thai and Lao languages are closely related, there are many words that differ or are pronounced differently. Sometimes, customers may not be from the Isan region, so communicating in central Thailand is crucial for effective engagement with customers. In some instances, the karaoke lounge hostesses have to join with customers to sing popular songs, and correct pronunciation is vital. Incorrect pronunciation might lead to misunderstanding or ridicule from customers, thus reducing sexual appeal and undermining women's self-confidence. Again, in the words of Gam, who had previously worked in Karaoke lounges?

"One thing I initially felt uncertain about was speaking central Thai. Sometimes, customers were from outside the region and did not understand Lao or even the Isan dialect. In those situations, we needed to adapt to the customer's preferred language and avoid excluding them from our conversations. Some customers appreciated that we were Lao nationals and wanted to hear us speak Lao to them, as it added an exotic touch to their experience. Occasionally, customers requested us to sing songs for them, mostly mainstream Thai songs. Even with the phonetic subtitles in the Karaoke machine, it

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<sup>18</sup> Gam (assumed nicknames), Ibid

was crucial for us to sing the songs with the correct pronunciation to avoid being ridiculed or seen as a source of amusement. This also involved singing in the correct key! (Laughs)."<sup>19</sup>

All these adjustments and transformations have reinforced the lure of commercial sex as a crucial foundation of these entertainment establishments – appearing to be legitimate businesses on the outside, but being a front for freelance commercial sex. This led to significant growth in the restaurant and food and beverage service industry in Isan, along with the expansion of the local tourism business in the Thai-Lao border areas. Moreover, bar/restaurant and Karaoke lounge businesses with female Lao workers as service staff have increasingly expanded into the inner provinces of the Isan region, especially in Udon Thani, Nong Bua Lamphu, Sakon Nakorn, Khon Kaen, Roi Et, Kalasin, and Maha Sarakham, among others.

## **2. Selling emotions and the negotiation of emotional labor**

The lives of female Lao workers in the role of service providers or sellers of emotions 'to customers in entertainment establishments in the Isan region are aimed at bringing happiness. However, their lives are not smooth, comfortable, or free from various problems. When these women interact with customers, they face challenges related to being Lao women, legal issues, and the nature of their work. All these challenges can become significant issues and obstacles in their lives in the Isan region of Thailand.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, these women cannot be passive or held back from facing and adapting to the surrounding environment. These difficulties have turned into challenges for learning and adapting to their surroundings. Simultaneously, these workers have utilized their innate female strengths, particularly the skill of 'caring,' to negotiate with male customers or clients seeking happiness or emotional escape. This negotiation aims to achieve economic returns and to support families in the home village. One common aspiration among some of the more skilled workers is that they can eventually become owners of their own businesses and become financially independent, no longer needing to sell sex.

Entering emotional labor (i.e., selling sex) is illegal in Thailand. However, these Lao workers learn and adapt to circumvent such legal restrictions. One common method employed by emotional labor workers is to work within the framework of the Thai tourism industry.

The Thai government has had to confront the problem of unauthorized laborers from neighboring countries coming to work continuously. In the decade starting around 2002, the Thai government began to collaborate with three of its lower-income neighbors (Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR) to address the issue of unauthorized labor entering Thailand. For Thailand and the Lao PDR, there was development and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on Employment Cooperation (MOU) between the government of the Kingdom of Thailand and the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on October 18, 2002.

However, the problem of unauthorized entry into work in Thailand seemed to persist. This is because laborers have adapted and changed their methods, shifting from natural and traditional border crossings to using tourist visas. After entering Thailand with tourist visas, they covertly engage in work activities and return through immigration checkpoints every month. This method allows laborers to travel freely within Thailand without spending a significant amount of money. Additionally, female workers in the service sector employ this strategy to avoid the high costs associated with hiring agents to circumvent Thai immigration (approximately 13,000–20,000 baht). When entering work legally, if questioned or inspected by officials, individuals often use a passport, claiming that they have come to stay or visit relatives in Thailand. This method helps them avoid the legal actions of Thai authorities. For example, "Pam", a Lao woman from Luang Prabang Province, used this approach to enter and work in Thailand without ever obtaining a work permit. She invested approximately 3,500 baht to obtain passport. Subsequently, she used this passport as a travel document to enter Maha Sarakham Province in central Isan, joining some of her fellow villagers from

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<sup>19</sup> Gam (assumed nicknames), Ibid

Laos. If questioned about the documents, she would confidently show her passport, and no one would suspect anything illegal. This method significantly reduced the travel expenses associated with entering work in the Isan region. Moreover, it minimizes the risk of threats and harassment from ill-intentioned individuals during their employment journey.

"The expenses for entering to work legally are also high. For Lao individuals without sufficient funds for their own travel arrangements, it is relatively challenging unless the employer facilitates it. The cost for one person is substantial, nearly 20,000 baht. Employers are hesitant to arrange documentation in advance because, in this profession, individuals often change workplaces every few months. Employers are reluctant to provide such arrangements due to the risk of workers fleeing. Therefore, using a passport has become a common practice among laborers, as the cost is around 2,500 to 4,000 baht, making it convenient for them to move around Isan. When questioned by the police while at an entertainment establishment, Lao workers can claim to be tourists and say they stopped by to visit relatives who own the establishment. Thai authorities often do not further inquire in such situations."<sup>20</sup>

The emotional resilience of laborers engaged in commercial sex work is crucial, focusing on both refusal and self-protection. Informal learning through social relationships enables these workers to raise important issues such as menstruation and the use of condoms to prevent both pregnancy and STIs.

Thus, women's negotiation skills are of paramount importance. Lao laborers must continually develop and hone these skills as they are integral to their own well-being and safety in their work, particularly in situations where threats arise from clients they serve or harassment from the workplace. If they assess that a client has a negative demeanor or uses an inappropriate language, they must know how to protect themselves. In most entertainment establishments, if they do not wish to engage with a potentially dangerous or undesirable client (for paid sex elsewhere), they have the right to refuse. Female workers often use the reason for menstruation as an excuse, stating that they cannot provide services during this time. Clients were generally not allowed to force female workers to engage in intimate activities during this period.

When engaging with clients or selling sex, an essential item that must be carried at all times is a condom. Condoms are crucial for the safety of female workers and protect them from STI and unplanned pregnancies. These female workers consistently emphasize the importance of using condoms, as narrated by lounge owners and colleagues. If a client refuses to wear a condom, sex is denied. Most establishments reinforce the hostess's right to refuse unsafe sex with their customers. In an in-depth interview, Gam discussed survival tactics when encountering clients who were disliked or deemed likely to make the work challenging or unpleasant:

"It is not uncommon to encounter disrespectful clients who are often intoxicated and speak rudely, yet they express a desire for us to accompany them to a motel for sex. Even when they use vulgar language, they still expect us to go with them. However, we have the right to refuse to accompany them if they do not show us respect while we are in the lounge and the owner or manager is present. We can usually discern which customers are trustworthy and those who may pose a threat or be abusive outside the establishment. If we identify clients of the latter type, we prefer not to engage with them. We may provide various excuses or express discomfort, and the lounge owner may also step in to prevent us from leaving with them. If we sense that a client may not use condoms, we have the right to decline to go with them. A common reason we give in such situations is that we are experiencing our menstrual cycle, which often deters unpleasant clients. Another group of clients we avoid are those who demonstrate a reluctance to use protection or refuse to wear condoms. We choose not to accompany them because the risk is not worth it. Our friends and the lounge owner

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<sup>20</sup> Pam (assumed nicknames): Interviewed on January 16, 2021

also emphasize the importance of this decision. We particularly appreciate it when a customer insists on using a condom as it demonstrates genuine concern for our safety.”<sup>21</sup>

One important aspect of negotiation for female Lao workers in the role of "emotional labor" in Karaoke lounges is the establishment of connections or relationships within Thailand as a path to security and advancement in life. For example, having a male Thai partner becomes a strategy or tactic utilized by some Lao workers to help negotiate with the powers that be. This strategy often involves entering into a quasi-marital relationship, thus creating a "Thai husband, Lao wife" dynamic. It serves as an option for these female workers in their struggle and negotiation against the challenges they may encounter.

Living as a female laborer in Thailand, particularly working as a service staff in Karaoke lounges, is not an easy matter. Various factors limit their way of life, including legal conditions, being non-Thai, and clandestinely working. Working as a service staff in Karaoke lounges, coupled with the pressure to remit funds to the family back home, contributes significantly to the hardships faced by these Lao workers. Many dreams of saving money to return and open a small shop back to their hometowns. However, there are also many who express that if they find a Thai man who genuinely loves them, they are willing to live together in Thailand. Being an employee in a Karaoke lounge incurs a significant cost for these women, which is the "care" they provide as a service to clients every day. This drains these women, both physically and emotionally. Even though they try to convince themselves that this is just a "job," deep down, they count the days until they can quit and pursue a more dignified occupation. When lounge hostesses have the opportunity to interact and converse with clients who frequently patronize the establishment, they can develop personal relationships that could lead to a more formal pairing. Once mutual affection develops, the man may invite the Lao hostess to live with him in a rented room with a couple-like arrangement. This type of family is often referred to by locals as a "Thai husband and Lao wife's family. This is a crucial aspect that allows Lao female workers to break free from the role of service staff in Karaoke lounges or be compelled to provide emotional labor. Vilai, (assumed nickname), age 32, is a Lao woman who decided to leave work in a Karaoke lounge and co-habits with a Thai man. In her words:

"I chose to marry a Thai man to escape the Karaoke lounges where I initially worked. I never intended to work in such a place but was deceived into it. If I had known, I would not have come. After about two weeks, I was arrested by the Thai police for lacking a work permit and travel documents. I felt distressed, homesick, and regretful. I spent a week in prison until the establishment owner bailed me out, creating a debt I had to repay through work. I longed to go home but lacked the means. It was only when I met my current partner, who was vacationing with friends, that I saw a chance to seek help and explain my situation." (Interview dated January 25, 2017)<sup>22</sup>

Many of these Thai-Laos couples live together openly, while others maintain more discreet relationships, but support each other financially while the woman remains in Thailand. Several Laotian women have used this support to develop themselves as entrepreneurs. Some opened restaurants, grocery stores, agricultural supply shops, and car repair shops. Many have evolved into business owners or owners of Karaoke lounges, taking on new roles in managing establishments. They also recruited younger Lao women from their hometowns to work as service staff in their own businesses, similar to their past experiences. This is illustrated in the case of Bowl,<sup>23</sup> aged 36, who owns a karaoke lounge in the Khemarat District of Ubon Ratchathani Province. In her words:

"Before becoming the owner of a Karaoke lounge, I worked in similar establishments. I may have been luckier than many of my friends who worked with me. After working in a Thai restaurant for over a year, I entered into a romantic relationship with a Thai police officer. He asked me to quit my

<sup>21</sup> Gam (assumed nicknames), Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Choltida Bua-ha. (2018). Thai Husbands, Lao Wives: Practices of Lao Women in Thai Families. Master's thesis in Social Development. Graduate School. Khon Kaen University. p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Bowl (assumed nicknames ):Interviewed on March 30, 2020

job, and we started living together. Subsequently, he opened a made-to-order food shop for me in a rented house. After some time, I returned to Laos to renew my passport and visit my family. My younger sister expressed interest in working with me, so we continued selling made-to-order food together. Over time, we expanded our offerings to include drinks, and with an increase in male customers, we decided to venture into opening a small Karaoke lounge. Regular customers began frequenting the lounge, prompting me to recruit girls from my home village in Laos to work with us. Eventually, the business grew into a large and popular Karaoke lounge."

There is also the case of Taew,<sup>24</sup> aged 30, who used to work as a waitress in a restaurant before meeting her Thai husband, who was a regular customer there. In the words of Taew:

"Before deciding to become the owner of this grilled chicken shop, I worked at a Karaoke lounge. Initially, I was a server, but during slow customer traffic, I also helped in the kitchen. I ended up preparing Thai dishes because, although Thai and Lao grilled chicken are similar, the taste and certain preparation methods differ. For instance, in a Lao-style minced beef dish, we add fermented fish sauce, which is not typical in Thailand. I learned the recipe from the restaurant where I used to work. After leaving that job and marrying my Thai husband, I decided to use my savings and his support to open this Isan-style food shop in front of our house. I believed that it would be well-received by the locals because our dishes are prepared in a traditional way."

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

During the 2000s-2010s, the Isan region underwent significant transformation from a predominantly rural society to a peri-urban society. The service sector, particularly in the business and entrepreneurial domains, emerged as a vital source of income for the country and for labor from neighboring countries, especially female labor from Laos. A substantial number of female Lao workers migrate to the Isan region to work in bars and restaurants, particularly in "Karaoke lounges." In some instances, these lounges also serve as fronts for lounge hostesses who provide sexual services to customers, engaging in what is known as "emotional labor."

These cross-border migrants leave behind dependent family members with the expectation that they will remit funds once they establish a steady income. The allure of quick cash from selling sex often outweighs other options. Additionally, female Lao workers leverage their feminine qualities, particularly in the realm of "care." Apart from attending to male customers at the Karaoke lounge, they also support their families in Laos emotionally. This emotional strength and sense of responsibility toward their families serve as powerful motivators that help them overcome moral qualms about engaging in emotional labor.

The living conditions and constraints faced by Lao migrants in Thailand vary in terms of legal, gender, occupational, and ethnic aspects, presenting challenges, especially in the Isan region. These obstacles necessitate Laotian women to constantly adapt and turn adversity into opportunities. They learn on the job from establishment owners and peers, acquiring knowledge through trial and error (Kohen, 2010; Lowthers, 2018). These women undergo a process of self-adjustment, transitioning from engaging in sex with customers out of personal feelings to viewing paid sex as a form of "emotional labor," transforming their intimate relationships into transactional dynamics (Warr & Pyett, 1999; Piscitelli, 2016; Brents & Hausbeck, 2010). Several studies examine the intersection of power, intimacy, love, and sexuality in sex work and how these factors shape the lived realities of sex workers (Mahdavi, 2017; Lutz & White, 1986). A similar study also highlights the impact of race, gender, and class on the experiences of sex workers, and how their identities intersect with their work (Warr, & Pyett, 1999). Another study findings emphasize the need for a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of sex work that considers the diverse experiences of individuals involved in the industry (Yeoh & Huang, 1998).

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<sup>24</sup> Taew (assumed nicknames ): Interviewed on April 21, 2020

The study presents the story of Lao women who have entered the service sector in the northeastern region of Thailand, exploring the challenges they face due to legal restrictions and gender bias. The study highlights the various strategies they use for adaptation and resilience, including obtaining tourist passports and learning the Thai language. Additionally, the study discusses how Lao female workers aim to transition from service roles to becoming small-scale entrepreneurs in the growing economy of the northeastern region. The findings of this study offer a unique perspective on the experiences of cross-border migrants in the service sector, a topic that has not been extensively discussed in academic literature. Compared to previous research, this article sheds light on the daily life experiences of Lao women and emphasizes their struggles, achievements, and aspirations. In comparison to previous studies, this research provides a more in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by Lao female workers in the service sector in the northeastern region of Thailand. Furthermore, the research discusses how Lao female workers aspire to transition from service roles to becoming small-scale entrepreneurs in the growing economy of the northeastern region. Overall, the findings of this study offer a unique perspective on the experiences of cross-border migrants in the service sector, a topic that has not been extensively discussed in academic literature.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the 2000s, the Northeastern region of Thailand transitioned to a semi-urban, semi-rural, or entrepreneurial society. The service sector generates significant revenue for both the region and the country. At the same time, it is a significant source of income for workers from neighboring countries, particularly Lao female workers who travel in large numbers to work in restaurants and bars such as "karaoke bars" in the Northeast, some of whom secretly sell sexual services to customers as "emotional labor." These Lao women workers have taken the distinctive feature of being women, which is "taking care", to be an important product in providing services to customers who use the services, who are mostly local Thai men. These Lao women workers have turned their particular attribute of being a woman, "taking care," into a significant product in offering services to customers, who are predominantly Thai men." Due to legal restrictions, the majority of them are considered illegal immigrants. Being a woman in the service industry, as well as ethnic prejudice, have become significant barriers that have led to them being exploited, oppressed, and subjugated in their daily lives. However, they refuse to quit or give in to this oppressive power. However, if there is an interesting way to adapt and negotiate with these conditions, starting with learning how to work from shop owners and coworkers and trial and error at work, changing the workers' perspectives on selling sex services from having sex with loved ones to satisfy their own feelings of love and lust, it becomes having sex to sell services or "working" as "emotional labor."

Furthermore, for Lao female workers, the process of changing themselves into emotional labor requires the continuous development of their appearance to be beautiful, whether via attire or beauty, as well as training in guest service. This is the process of transforming their personal strength, "care," into a product, and they must learn to be professional by demonstrating sincerity in their service. To avoid being regarded down upon, they must practice singing and speaking Central Thai clearly. The final important part of emotional labor, sex employment, is knowing how to refuse when they are not ready for sex for their own safety, which includes requiring their customers to wear condoms. It was also discovered that most Lao female workers used tourist passports rather than work licenses to avoid arrest by authorities, and that many utilized marriages to Thais as a vital doorway to developing themselves as entrepreneurs in the Northeast, allowing for a safe escape within the region. These stories should be preserved and not lost from Isan history, rather than Isan or Thai society viewing them as a place to "vent their emotions" and "others" who are not Thais in Isan society alone.

## **LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

Accessing informants is tough, especially when it comes to gaining confidence from both Lao female workers and their employers.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**



Future research should look on the lives of Lao workers and other ethnic groups who contribute to and are affected by social, economic, and political changes in Thailand's northeast. This will prevent the history of the northeast from being limited to only the northeastern people or Thai people.

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## Interviewees (assumed nicknames)

Bowl: Interviewed on March 30, 2020  
Eiw: Interviewed on January 5, 2020  
Fan: Interviewed on June 10, 2020  
Gam: Interviewed on March 5, 2020  
Kiang: Interviewed on March 4, 2020  
Pam: Interviewed on January 16, 2021  
Taew: Interviewed on April 21, 2020