

# ICTs and its Social Meanings: Women in the Margins of Thailand (December 2010)

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**Abstract—** This paper seeks to surface the social implications of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for marginalized women in Thailand-Burma border as brought about by globalization and technological change. Many of the debates surrounding ICTs have been centered on technologies as drivers of growth and transformation of economies as information economy and knowledge society. While it has helped the economies of most developed countries, the urban-rural divide in sharing the benefits derived from ICTs in most developing countries such as Thailand persist. A notable implication is ICTs' influence in the lives of marginalized women migrant workers and refugees in Thailand in the context of community empowerment from a repressive military regime of Burma. The enabling environment of ICTs in the border created significant difference in their survival as freedom of information, communication and mobility had been largely repressed inside their own country. This paper argues that opportunities for women to access and use ICTs may be seen along several perspectives ranging from binding family ties, social networking and expanding relations to a broader perspective as learning arena, venue for advocacy and amplifying women's voices and sites for cultural expression and entertainment. However, while use of ICTs allow for processes of information and communication that were previously impossible to attain to a group of women, a large number of women is still excluded in the process.

**Index Terms—** Communications technology, Globalization, Social implications, Technology

## I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the rapid evolution of ICTs<sup>1</sup> over the past decade has resulted in the further improvement of economic opportunities through information sharing. This situation is evident in most of the developed countries in the North while leaving behind the developing countries such as in the global South with the exception of Singapore, Korea, and Japan<sup>2</sup>. A prevailing concern in the access of ICTs also emerged that has widened digital divide within and across countries specifically

in the Asia-Pacific Region. Consequently, the gap has become more alarming in the context of marginalization of rural communities coupled with the widening information opportunity gaps between rural and urban communities. Rural communities particularly women there, face the risks of socioeconomic development.

Women use ICTs less than men, access the internet less and spend less time, and do not have the same levels of access at work (Nsibriano, 2009; Kennedy et al, 2003; Hongladarom, 2003). Most of the digital divide studies had focused on documenting statistical differences in access and use while little has been accorded in looking at the causes of the divide with focus on marginalized women in developing countries like Thailand. While Thailand's National ICT Policy (IT2010) is anchored in promoting knowledge-based society and economy, and posits that development does not focus on "technology" *per se*, but rather, on the good uses of ICT that would drive overall national economic and social development<sup>3</sup>, there is quite limited evidence on how such has taken shape among vulnerable sectors and groups like women. The influx of migrant workers and refugees to the Tak Province in Thailand from Myanmar<sup>4</sup> provides an interesting case for examining how and to what extent ICTs have reshaped and influenced the lives of marginalized women<sup>5</sup>.

This paper aims to surface and understand the role of ICTs in influencing the lives of marginalized women in Thailand-Burma border. It focuses in answering the question: how do ICTs facilitate social empowerment among women? In getting the responses of women, a combination of qualitative research methodologies were utilized: 27 long interviews with individual women of different ethnic groups, 5 focused group discussions, participant observation and 8 key informant interviews mostly with individuals in community-based organizations.

The concept of empowerment<sup>6</sup> and agency<sup>7</sup> is useful in

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the use of internet and mobile phones in this paper

<sup>2</sup> Global IT Report 2009-2010.

<sup>3</sup> National ICT Policy of Thailand

<sup>4</sup> Also referred to as Burma in this paper

<sup>5</sup> Marginalized women in this study refers to the women migrant workers and refugees who had left Burma due to military upheavals and are now staying in the Thai-Burma border area in Tak Province. The Thai Government considers them displaced people.

<sup>6</sup> Adopts Moser's definition as *the ability to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to take*

looking at the ways women migrants and refugees utilize ICTs. These concepts tend to play significant role in illustrating the dynamics and relationships in women's lived experiences in their access and use of ICTs. The recent work of Koggel in the field of ICTs is found to be relevant in looking at social relations of women under study. Koggel (Forthcoming, 2007:2-3) demonstrates that:

*Conceiving empowerment as a process suggests that agency approaches need to be contextual, relational, and responsive to changing conditions and circumstances. Where people are located, what opportunities and resources are available, what roles and functions are performed and by whom, and whether local conditions are impacted by national and global factors and actors are issues relevant to the analysis of empowerment.*

Given this, the social meanings in women's associational life at the household and community in their access and use of ICTs is looked into. This paper takes on the variations created in specific context where women as actors operate.

## II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Migrant workers and refugees living in Tak Province have a long history of struggle from Burma's repressive military junta. For over 50 years, people of different ethnic groups<sup>8</sup> have been resisting economic, cultural, social and political suppression by the Burmese military regime. These groups are at risk and caught in conflict between the military and rebel groups. The chaotic situation pushed the people especially women and their children to flee across the Thai border and now living in several camps such as in study areas Umpiem Mai<sup>9</sup>, Mae La<sup>10</sup> and in Mae Sot<sup>11</sup> in Tak Province (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Mae Sot in Tak Province, Thailand

The combined population of refugees in all the 10 camps in Thailand is close to 150,000 and around 80,000 is staying in the camps in Tak Province<sup>12</sup>. The Karen comprise 61 percent of the refugees in the camps. In the same period, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded 102,418 registered refugees, half of which are staying in the three camps and had an almost equal number for women (26,382) and men (26,520). Many are still left and cannot get across the borders have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Burma<sup>13</sup>.

In Thailand, the ethnic groups can be classified into two: *refugees*<sup>14</sup> and *migrant workers*<sup>15</sup>. The Thai government<sup>16</sup> limits the movement and opportunities for refugees. The UNHCR has resettled around 30,000<sup>17</sup> refugees to third countries, but the continuous arrival of new entrants from Burma has merely replaced this number. Migrant workers make up a sizable population<sup>18</sup> and are predominantly illegal workers because they do not have work permits and most belong to the lower income group.

## III. VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

### A. Users of ICTs

<sup>12</sup> Thailand-Burma Border Consortium report as of June 30, 2010. It includes people eligible for rations. <http://www.tbtc.org/camps/2010-06-jun-map-tbbc-unhcr.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6397243.stm>

<sup>14</sup> The refugees are not allowed to work or have livelihood activities. Instead, they are given food ration and clothing by humanitarian agencies and assistance from non-government organizations (NGOs).

<sup>15</sup> Migrant workers have more mobility and employment opportunities in the border towns but do not have the chance to be resettled and migrate to developed countries unlike the refugees. The migrants cross the Thai border primarily for employment.

<sup>16</sup> It did not sign the 1951 convention on the rights of the refugees and does not call them refugees but displaced people

<sup>17</sup> <http://www0.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=27158>

<sup>18</sup> Migrant workers in border provinces are more than 500 thousand. There are 40 thousand migrant workers in *tambon* (sub-district) Mae Sod, which is one of the closest towns to the Thai-Burma border and has one of the highest migrant populations. See [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=15194](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15194)

*control over crucial material and non-material resources.* (Moser, 1993: 74-5)

<sup>7</sup> Agency includes the meanings, motivations and purposes that individuals adopt to achieve their goals. (Kabeer, 1999:3)

<sup>8</sup> Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Chin, Kachin, and others

<sup>9</sup> Located in Pho Phra District, Tak Province in northwestern Thailand. It has the highest elevation among the camps along the border with over 1,100 meters altitude; 10 km from the border and 87 km from Mae Sot. [www.tbtc.org/mst/htm](http://www.tbtc.org/mst/htm)

<sup>10</sup> Mae La is in Tha Song Yang District, Tak Province; 8 km from the border and 57 km from Mae Sot. [www.tbtc.org/mst/htm](http://www.tbtc.org/mst/htm)

<sup>11</sup> Mae Sot is a town in western Thailand sharing a border with Burma (Myanmar) to the west; land area is 1,9861 sq km; trade hub in Tak Province; gateway to Burma. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mae\\_Sot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mae_Sot)

In this paper, the users of ICTs, particularly the Internet, are usually women migrant workers based in Mae Sot. Some women refugees in Umpiem Mai and Mae La camps only had access to mobile phones. The use of ICTs was relatively dependent on its accessibility, affordability, and availability apart from the capability and ability. Internet shops are usually located in the urban center of Mae Sot and are relatively distant from women's workplace and residence. The presence of Internet shop in the rural village is seldom. In the case of Miyek<sup>19</sup> women migrants, they prefer to use Internet in a shop within their village due to its availability and accessibility. Most migrant women workers interviewed used the Internet in their workplace<sup>20</sup> as it provides more comfort, readily available at no cost.

*I have never tried going to Internet shops in Mae Sot since I arrived in 2006. Internet is readily available in our workplace. I can check email anytime and staff had the privilege for free wifi access. (Zar Zar, 33 BWU).*

Migrant women interviewed learned how to use then Internet from co-workers, friends, computer training provided by NGOs and migrant schools. The study reveals that constant and daily use of computers and Internet in their work (i.e., as migrant school teachers, librarian, IGP coordinator, and as volunteers in education, and health programs, etc.) had provided impetus for further learning and gaining self-confidence in accomplishing workload. The use of Internet is perceived as an integral part of women's work.

*I gained knowledge of Internet from a senior staff of Karen Women's Organization (KWO). She taught me how to check email, attach photos, and browse websites. Some friends also taught me. Constant use and self-study also helped me a lot in my work especially health issues (Naw Eh Sew, 26 KWO).*

However, the use of mobile phone is relatively easier than Internet to both women migrant workers and refugees as it is user-friendly with its simple features and does not require much skill to operate. Immediate kin and friends are often contacted and consulted when difficulties are met. Mobile phones are used often to contact immediate kin, relatives and co-workers and during emergencies particularly in the case of women refugees in the 2 camps.

*My mobile phone is second hand, no camera and Internet connection. I just want to use it for calls to contact my mother and son in the camp to check on their situation and to*

*inform them of my monthly remittance. (Cho Thae, 27 BWU).*

### *B. Social Meanings on the Use of ICTs in Women's Daily Lives*

The access and use of ICTs particularly internet and to some extent mobile phones have created significant social meanings to women migrant workers in Mae Sot in several ways:

*Binding family ties.* Internet and mobile phone were instrumental tools in bringing and maintaining closer family ties (immediate kin and relatives) together despite their distance. Many Karen, Burmans, Lahu and Miyek women interviewed have families left in Burma while some had already resettled to "third countries" such as USA, Canada, Australia, and Norway;

*Mobile phone is useful in our daily lives. My husband and I can respond to the calls of our 4 children and grandchildren who are all in the US (Auntie Rolly, 47 Umpiem Camp).*

*G-talk helps me reconnect with Karen/Burmese friends in the US, Canada, Australia and Norway and get to know their situation there. (Cho Thae, 27 BWU)*

*Social networking and expanding relations.* It paves the way for a shift in communicating beyond household such as reconnecting to old friends, colleagues; making new friends from outside of Burma and Thailand; expanding relations to other organizations<sup>21</sup> at the local and international level; and expanding actual and potential markets for handicrafts through website promotion and online marketing;

*In between work, I can also chat to some friends in Australia, India, and Canada. Most of them are men who had stayed in the camp but now resettled in third countries during the past two years. (Zar Zar, 33 BWU Librarians).*

*Learning arena.* Educational information relevant to work and for self-education such as issues on human rights, women's rights, democracy, educational music, English language, news updates, are mostly accessed and downloaded by women migrant workers from websites.

*It's easy for me to check news via Kwekalut and BBC websites to*

<sup>19</sup> Miyek is one of the ethnic groups in Burma.

<sup>20</sup> Case of Karen and Burmese women migrant workers working with Karen Women's Organization and Burmese Women's Union based in Mae Sot, Thailand.

<sup>21</sup> Community-based organizations (CBOs) such as women's groups and church groups, local and international nongovernmental organizations, donor agencies and government agencies

*update me about the situation in Burma and share the news to people in the community who do not have access to Internet. I also utilize the information in the class. (Si Si Hwe, 27, teacher).*

*Venue for advocacy and amplifying women's voices.* The use of email and chat serves as venues in amplifying women's issues, statements, positions for advocacy in the form of lobby and campaign within and among women's networks<sup>22</sup>, donor partners, and government agencies.

*My organization can easily send statement of support by email to Thai government regarding women's issues in the camps that we assist. (Naw Dah Mu, 27, KWO IGP Coordinator).*

*Arena of cultural expression and entertainment.* Youtube, Kwakiutl and related websites were most sought by women migrants where they can listen and download Karen/Burmese music. Preferences of music vary by age. Older women often listen to folk and nation songs while younger women likes' hip-hop and upbeat music. Some women refugees in the camps use Karen music as their ring tones.

*If I miss my mother who lives in Burma, I just listen to Mother's Love music "Mu Ta Ehl". I reflect my life in Burma through Karen songs. (Judy Paw, 21 KWO Volunteer).*

### C. Non-Users of ICTs

Non-users of ICTs refer to women who live in refugee camps with ages ranging from 23 to 50. These are women who relatively have limitations in opportunity and space to information and communication especially in terms of literacy, mobility, accessibility, and affordability. Most of the non-users were not able to finish primary and secondary education due to the military repression in their home country.

*Since some of us cannot read nor write, training is done in the form of discussion. We learn something about health, children's and women's rights and also livelihood. (Soe, 34, Umpiem Mai)*

*Our movement in the camp is very restricted. Every time we go out, we*

*need to inform the Station Commander of our whereabouts and we can only stay up to four days outside. Otherwise, the Thai police will already look for us (Pa Nah, 45, Umpiem Mai)*

Refugee women and the rest of their family members communicate with their loved ones through writing letters and which are sent mostly through friends or relatives who had the chance to go out of the camp. Though reply from kin takes a longer period,<sup>23</sup> women, especially mothers feel happy knowing that their son or daughter in Mae Sot is safe and healthy. In the FGDs conducted, women expressed their desire to have mobile phones but could not afford to buy yet as it is not a priority in the household's subsistence budget. Instead, they have opted to borrow from close friends or neighbors in case of emergency to contact their kin.

Though women tend to see entrenched barriers to their social empowerment in not using ICTs, they are actively coping in some ways with the help of CBOs<sup>24</sup> in the Camps. They are able to gain awareness on issues affecting them, earn income through weaving, and the freedom to borrow phones when needed.

## IV. CONCLUSION

This initial study illustrates that access and use of ICTs tends to create differentiated influence on women in various ways. Institutions such as household and community seem to influence changes in social relations with ICTs.

For most women migrant workers, ICTs opened up their gates for interesting social opportunities ranging from binding family ties, social networking and expanding relations to a broader perspective as learning arena, venue for advocacy and amplifying women's voices and sites for cultural expression and entertainment. While use of ICTs allow for processes of information and communication that were previously impossible to attain to a group of women, a large number of women is still excluded in the process.

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<sup>22</sup> The community-based women's organizations, to which the individual women respondents belong, are part of the larger women's umbrella network called Women's League of Burma (WLB). It is where common issues and positions (in relation to institutions of democracy in Burma and women's human rights) of 13 members are discussed and come up with unified agenda for lobby and advocacy to government/s and other concerned agencies.

<sup>23</sup> Two weeks to a month

<sup>24</sup> Examples of CBOs helping women in the Camps are Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE) and KWO and others who provide information sharing about human rights, women's and children's rights, livelihood, and health at least twice or thrice a year.

Researchers, interpreters, and all the women migrant workers and refugees, the CBOs and key informants for actively sharing their experiences and insights during the course of the study.

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