



Transforming Roles and Functions of Women in the Northeast Region of Thailand

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to study the transformation of roles and functions of women in the northeast region of Thailand since the 1st century up the 21st century. Documentary research was used for this research with content analysis used to analyze the data. The research findings revealed that the Isaan women's roles and functions had changed constantly which can be described through three main periods. *Firstly*, during the arrival of states (between 1 and 1800 A.D.) the arrivals of Indianisation – such as Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and the patrilineal ideology – were the driving forces that transformed the relationship between men and women from a horizontal perspective to vertical. *Secondly*, during the period of absolute monarchy under the Chakri Dynasty (between 1801 and 1931 A.D.), there was no empirical evidence identifying the changing roles and functions of Isaan women, however, this was the starting point for women's rights and freedoms along with their empowerment through education. *Thirdly*, the period of the democracy revolution and the national economic and social development plans (between 1932 and 2016 A.D.) may be regarded as being significant in generating the changing roles and functions of Isaan women in the dimensions of socio-culture, economics, and politics. Interestingly, it was found that democracy was the essential portal that allowed Isaan women to follow up on their opportunities.

Keywords: Northeast Region of Thailand, Transformation, Woman's Roles and Functions

Introduction

According to the topography of the northeast region of Thailand, it is different from the other regions in that most of the land consists of a high plain known as Isaan. The region is regarded as the biggest and most populous of the country. Although the Mun and the Chi Rivers make some parts of the land productive, a large part remains drought-stricken. The region has also been considered as a problem area of the country with low per capita income, environmental degradation, and controversial politics. However, the area is endowed with a rich cultural heritage which has been achieved during the various periods of Isaan civilization (Wanliphodom, 1938). Since the mid-19th century, the northeast region has been under the administration of Bangkok; nevertheless, Lao culture and social structures still have influence in this area. In regard to gender ideology, both Western and Thai scholars have claimed that male and female roles and functions in

the socio-cultural context of the northeast region were complementary or mutually supportive (Smutkupt, Kitiana and Phuttha, 1994; Smutkupt and Kitiana, 2002; Promphakping et al., 2008; Hall, 1994).

Traditionally, it was reported that daughters were preferred over sons and that they received an advantage in terms of property rights. This was especially the case in regard to the youngest daughter, who had a unique position in that it was her responsibility to care for her aged parents until their death. Hence, she inherited the parental home and the parents' share of rice-growing land while sons only inherited movable capital such as buffaloes and cattle. A man would also pay a 'bride price' for his future wife as a way of paying for access to her inheritance that he may receive through marriage. After the end of wedding ceremony, the groom would move to the bride's parent's house. It signified honor to the woman (Smutkupt, Kitiana and Phuttha, 1994; Promphakping et al., 2008).



Nevertheless, the researcher found that this was not as clear-cut as it may have seemed. In fact, there have been two types of wedding ceremony. In the first type, the groom would move to the bride's house; this ceremony was called "Avaha Mongkon." The northeasterners strongly believed that the new son-in-law would bring abundance, prosperity, and wellbeing into their house. In the second type, the bride moved to the groom's parent's house; this was called "Vivaha Mongkon". This type of arrangement hardly ever took place in the region because people believed that the bride would bring disease, ghosts, and badness into the house. Therefore, the thinking behind an Isaan wedding ceremony indicated that a man was accepted to a greater extent than a woman (Clergyman Institute in the Northeastern Thailand, 1990).

Furthermore, Klong 14 (the fourteen moralities) emphasized inequality between men and women and identified the gender roles. Klong 14 provided social and governing rules that the northeasterners must follow (Wanlu, Chantachon and Rachote, 2009; Clergyman Institute in the Northeastern Thailand, 1990). It was conventionally accepted that the woman's roles and functions were a big issue and so have been talked about to a greater extent than those of men. Klong 14 mentioned the woman's role, that is, the woman's role was as a daughter. The northeasterners compared a daughter with a toilet established in front of the house.

Not surprisingly, a daughter was controlled far more than a son because she could easily bring discontent into the house. As for the daughter's functions, she was responsible for household tasks. She cared for her parents, siblings, and other relatives. She would assist her mother in whatever way was required, and she would obey her father, brother, uncle or any other male relative. The woman's role was as a wife and mother. A good wife must be uncomplaining, obedient, submissive, passive, restrained, and tolerant. She must always put her husband and his needs above her own. The good mother would be compassionate and devoted; carrying and shielding her children from harm. As for a woman's general functions, they cooked food and went to the forest or to the fields to collect vegetables and other food items, including small animals and edible insects. They would also weave cloth or silk and husk rice after they were free from the cultivation and harvest seasons (Sansak, Lamduan and Champadaeng, 2014).

Also, ancient proverbs or 'Phya' had reinforced women's roles and functions, particularly the woman's roles and functions as a wife as reflected in the subordination of a woman to a man. The proverb shown below indicates the functions of a good wife (Clergyman Institute in the Northeastern Thailand, 1990).

"A wife authorized her husband to be the leader in the family and followed him.

When eating, a wife would eat after her husband.

When sleeping, a wife would sleep lower than her husband.

A wife would wake up before her husband and make piper betel leaf.

When a Buddhist holy day arrived, a wife would keep a flower to worship the Buddha.

A good wife must follow house 3 and water 4.

House 3 was that a wife must clean the bedroom, kitchen and hair.

Water 4 was that a wife would prepare drinking water, water to use, red lime water, and kindness."

Based on the literature review, it would be fair to say that Isaan women suffered from being treated unfairly and unequally. Their roles and functions were

subservient and controlled by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. They could not make any important decisions or even run their families equally. The society



was convinced that women were not capable of performing any work outside of the home. Thus, they were not allowed or expected to do anything except perform day-to-day tasks such as taking care of their children, preparing food for their husbands and family members and, washing clothes. In the 1990's the northeasterners suffered from drought and debt; as a result, labor migration became an increasingly important source for making money. It was reported that a large number of men and women sought work elsewhere in the country. In particular, most of them moved to Bangkok.

At present, it was found that their roles and functions constantly changed. That is, more than four decades, the women empowerments were supported from every government. According to the previous researches, it pointed out that a conceptual framework of four components of women's empowerment at household level have always referred to women's labor force participation, women's household decision-making, women's use of contraception and women's education (Akpabio, 2012; Dahal, 2013; Kishor and Gupta, 2004). This concept accorded with transforming the Isaan women's roles and functions. That is, they are likely to enter to the labor market, to gain power for decision-making, to participate in the politics. At present, Isaan women move to the cities with a high expectation of better economic opportunities. They also have an increasingly greater opportunity to study. The younger generation considers that the agricultural sector is hard work, with uncertain income and unsecure welfare, and therefore prefers to work in industry, trade and the service sectors (Lapanun, 1993; Sriruksa, 2014; Thomson, 1992).

National Statistic Office Thailand (2017) indicated that approximately 4,242,817 Isaan women had entered the labor sector. They also had access to compulsory education. Hence, it was not surprising that they had become more influential economically and had more opportunities in the work place. They

had more capacity and were able to work outside the home more than they would in the past. Based on these social phenomena, many scholars' research findings confirmed that the Isaan woman's roles and functions had been changed (Promphakping et al., 2008; Sriruksa, 2014; Lapanun, 1993; Lapanun, 2012). After the previous researches were reviewed, it was found that no prior researches had studied the transformation of the woman's roles and functions in the northeast region of Thailand. In order to fulfill this gap in the knowledge in the field of gender study, the following objectives would be studied.

Objective

To study the transformation of the roles and functions of women in the northeast region of Thailand, from the 1st century to the 21st century.

Methodology

The above objective of the study was tested using the qualitative approach in the form of documentary research. Three issues – data source, procedure and data analysis – are broadly explained here.

Data Source

The following documents were used to gather documentary evidence: books, researches, dissertations, online journals, government publications and legislation, non-government institution sources, and statistical data. All documents were selected through these criteria of the concept of documentary research – that is authenticity, credibility, representation, and meaning respectively.

Procedure

Assessment of written sources took place from 1st July to 31st December 2016. During that time, the researcher attempted to classify the documents. At the end of the literature review, along with analyzing the information, it was found that the transformation of women's roles and functions in the northeast region



could be divided into three main periods. Hence, the documents were divided into three main groups. Firstly, the documents mentioned the arrivals of each state in the northeastern region. Secondly, the documents concerned the women's roles and functions under the absolute monarchy of the Chakri dynasty. Thirdly, the documents referred to the democracy revolution and national economics and social development plans.

Data Analysis

After document classification, content analysis was used for analyzing the data. All documents were analyzed using a 3 step process of (1) de-contextualization (identifying and coding segments or units of meaning in the data), (2) subsequent re-contextualization (categorizing and thematically assembling segments with other segments that deal with the same topic), and (3) synthesis.

Results

Based on the content analysis, it was found that the northeastern woman's roles and functions constantly changed. In order to be easily understood, the transformation of women's roles and functions may be discussed through three main periods as follows:

1. The Arrival of States (between the 1st century and the 18th century or between 1 and 1800 A.D.)

According to gender ideology, Isaan women had appropriate roles within the socio-cultural spheres, comparable to those of their male counterparts. Their roles were mutually supportive in the family as well as in the community (Lapanun, 1993; Smutkupt, Kitiana and Phuttha, 1994; Smutkupt and Kitiana, 2002). However, upon deeper inspection it was found that the women's roles and functions gradually changed from that of a supporter to a follower. Tracking back the arrivals of each state in the northeast region, it could provide the picture of the transformation of women's roles and functions obviously as explained below:

1) Funan Kingdom (between the 1st century and the early 6th century), prior to the emergence of

the Funan Kingdom, the documents claimed that the women's roles and functions were equal to the men's role - women were accepted as a ruler and leader of the army. A kinship system traced through the ancestral lineages via the maternal line. Some communities and families were governed by a matriarch. Was this true or not? A legend of the Funan Kingdom reflects the woman's role at that time. Kaundinya was the founder of the Funan Kingdom. He was originally a Brahmin from India. One day, a voice told him "you must go and reign over Funan." So he journeyed beyond the Mekong River and arrived in the land ruled by King Naka. King Naka had a daughter who was the successor to the Naka throne. Her name was Soma. Her troops attacked Kaundinya's ship many times. During this battle, she was defeated and Kaundinya then married Soma and collected other city-states. Ultimately, Kaundinya became the King of Funan and changed all the laws to conform to the Indian system along with the penetration of Indianisation. Based on this legend, it was implied that women had considerable access to positions of public power. A woman ruler was able to represent the land of Funan, but after the marriage, Kaundinya, as the Indian husband, took over as king. A hundred years later, it had become the tradition that the Funan Kingdom was ruled only by men (The History of Cambodia from 1st Century to 20th Century, 2017a; Glover and Bellwood, 2005).

2) The Chenla Kingdom (between the mid-6th century and the 8th century), in the words of the broader society of the Chenla Kingdom; it was found that matrilineage, tracing descent through the maternal line, was a special characteristic of the social structure. Women, especially the queen played a significant role in building a Hindu temple; although it was established that a Hindu Temple should be built by a King. Therefore, some scholars believed that a Chenla woman was not considered to be a second class citizen; many women had central roles and functions in rituals, specialized in crafts, and were given the rank of high officials. In



that era, knowledge of languages was the significant variable, primarily, Khmer or Sanskrit. It was revealed that those who were literate and knew Sanskrit well; were given worthy tasks such as being an official or even a royal servant. On the other hand, those who were illiterate worked in the fields. Nevertheless, it was revealed that worthy work was taken only by men, while the women's roles and functions were expected to be done by a daughter, a housewife, and a mother (The History of Cambodia from 1st Century to 20th Century, 2017a; Saraya, 1997).

3) Khmer Empire (between the late 8th century and the late-13th century), according to the Khmer Empire, most scholars mentioned their architectural creations – that are: Angkor Wat, Bayon, Ta Prohm, Angkor Thom, Preah Khan, and Banteay Chhmar. The most prosperous age of the Khmer Empire was during the reigns of Jayavarman II and Jayavarman VII. Returning to the women's roles and functions, some documents stated that the queens were behind the succession of Khmer Kings. For instance, Jayavarman II admired his queen via the inscription below (Ngin, 2017):

She was Khmer land. She was Khmer dignity. She was King's Queen.

She was the good wife of husband. She was the goodness woman.

She was the most honest on her husband and honest on her duty.

She was the mother of Indravarman I who became the king of the Khmer Empire.

As for the above admiration, it is implied that queen played the essential role of creating the next king. In addition, the evidence of Bayon bas-reliefs showed that Jayavarman VII's queen frequently appeared behind the king in the palace. The queen also sat before the great Khmer conqueror. It reflected that queens had power and participation within the government. Basically, Hindu civilizations often limited education to men only, while Jayavarman VII's monasteries were open schools and training centers that welcomed men and women, boys and girls alike. By contrast, an ordinary woman was revealed to have much less access than men to the highest positions of political and economic power. The traditional codes of behavior for women were more elaborate and strict than those for men. Women's roles and functions were often marked symbolically as being inferior (The History of Cambodia from 1st Century to 20th Century, 2017b).

4) Tai-Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang (between the mid-14th century and the 18th century), in the age of the Lan Xang kingdom, the origin of the current matrilineal social organization of Lao society had

resulted from King Fa Ngum's Queen, known as Queen Nhotfa. She was the daughter of the Khmer king. She was a most powerful, influential and intelligent queen. She played an important role in governing the country. After King Fa Ngum died, Prince Sam Saen Thai ascended to the throne. Interestingly, it was revealed that the Queen governed Lan Xang for a while before, her son, Prince Sam Saen Thai. She transformed many laws and created many traditional rules and practices that gave women powerful positions, legitimate rights and created honor and respect for women within the family and in society at large. Especially, there was a tradition of newly married couples living with the bride's family. Furthermore, it was found that there was another queen who played a significant role in Lan Xang – she was Queen Maha Devi. Peter and Sanda (2001) recorded that Queen Maha Devi led Lan Xang into a Dark Age after the death of King Lan Kham Daeng. Her cruelty caused the nobles to decide to kill her; her death made Lan Xang peaceful again. Due to this, women were viewed to not be qualified and mature enough for leadership; hence, it led to limitations in women's roles, not only in the family



but also in the community. Besides, the arrival of Buddhism reinforced the patriarchal society. For instance, only a male child could repay his gratitude to his parents by ordaining as a monk, while a female could not (Tambiah, 1975; Evans, 2015).

5) Tai Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya (between the mid-14th century and the 18th century), in fact, the dominance of men still appeared in Thai society; however, it didn't mean that Thai women were free from discrimination in the country. Thai women were expected to have good manners, love to take care of the children, and were followers. These expectations became the stereotype of Thai women. Referring to the Sukhothai period, a man was able to have many wives. During the Ayutthaya period, in 1861, an edict stipulated that 'a man had the right to have several wives.' It also found that there was a proverb that reflected the male domination of society – that is '*woman is buffalo, man is human.*' Therefore, regardless of a Thai woman being born in a high or low society, they all had a lower status than men. On the political stage, it was found that women had become political tools, especially a lady of the court. For example, she would become a hostage if her country was defeated in war. Sometimes, she would be forced to marry with someone from another state in order to gain a political objective. She might be a reward for a noble who was victorious in war. On the religious side, Buddhism was very influential and dharma principle very strictly implemented in Thai society, for example women are forbidden to touch and stay privately with a monk or even stand higher. All Thai men need to be ordained to learn Buddhism as a monk due to the belief that they will get good virtue from it and show gratitude to their parents at the same time. Because of Buddhist principles, as explained, almost all activities in the temple would be driven by men and women would be responsible only for preparing food and doing some cleaning, the same as if they are in the house. For these reasons, some Thai men still

consider themselves to be of a higher level than Thai women (Hall, 1994; Syamananda, 1986).

2. Absolute Monarchy under the Chakri Dynasty (between 1801 and 1931 A.D.)

The arrivals from other states, the penetration of Indianisation – such as Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and the patrilineal ideology – influenced the northeasterner's values system; a man is like the front legs of an elephant while a woman is like its hind legs. After the researcher synthesized the information, it was found that the arrival of the European colonial powers became the starting point for women's rights and freedoms. In order to understand the transformation of women's roles and functions in the northeast region, it is necessary to mention the overview of women's roles and functions in Siam as follows:

During the reigns of King Rama II and King Rama III, Southeast Asia, including Thailand, encountered the age of the colonization and this intensified in the reign of King Rama IV. After his enthronement, he inaugurated the modernization of the country along western lines and introduced a policy in order to promote foreign relations. He started foreign trade with most of the powers of Europe by concluding treaties of friendship, trade, and navigation with them. Although he opened up his country to modern developments and prosperity, this did not stop the colonial powers taking advantage of the situation. The king realized that knowing and understanding English and other foreign languages had saved Thailand from colonization by the British or French. As a result of this, in 1852 he hired English and American missionaries to teach English to the 39 princes and 43 princesses (Military Thailand, 2017; Suksathikan, 1976).

During the reign of King Rama IV, it is fair to say that the arrival of the European colonial powers was the driving force leading to social change, especially in education. In this period, King Rama IV tried to expand education into the northeast region under the



administration of Dhammayut monks. The temple became the school and the center of education for boys and young men, although not for girls and young women. However, there were many problems as, conventionally, the northeastern's social values did not allow their children to be educated, especially the girls or young women. This was because education was not seen as a factor of production for the household and it did not help to increase the household's income. Most importantly, the northeasterners always thought that, soon or later, their daughter would be married, so it was not necessary for her to study. Communication between teacher and students became a big problem during the learning and teaching because Thai language became the official language of education. However, Chao Khun Upali Gunupamacariya (Jan Siricando), one of the Dhammayut monks, allowed teachers to use both Thai language and dialectic language when teaching. Over a number of years, education began to be more popular in the northeast region and the number of students continued to increase. However, the students were only boys and young men, the girls and young women could only study and learn from their parents and relatives (Fey and Bi, 2013; Kosaiyawat, 2003).

During the 1860s, feminists started to fight for women's rights and individual freedoms. According to the famous case of Amdaeng Muan, she submitted a desperate legal petition to King Rama IV. The petition mentioned her story as follows: she was a commoner woman in Nonthaburi. She loved Rid (Mr. Rid) who lived in the same village. Her parents did not know of her lover. At the same time, her parents forced her to marry a wealthy and polygamous man. She refused this marriage after she was beaten and threatened at gunpoint by her parents. She and Mr. Rid tried to escape from the village but they were caught in a case of adultery. She escaped from prison and sent her petition to King Mongkut. After she explained her story, King Mongkut promulgated a new decree on lakpha (abduction) in 1865 which allowed women,

aged above 20 years, to select their spouses without parental consent. In another famous case, Amdaeng Can's husband sold her into slavery without her consent. This case made King Mongkut launch a new law in 1868, prohibiting a commoner husband and parents from selling their wives and children without first receiving the permission of these dependents (Thomson, 1992).

At the end of the reign of King Rama IV, Chulalongkorn succeeded to the throne as King Rama V. In the early years of his reign, he toured British colonial countries and realized that a westernization concept was the only rational alternative way of saving Thailand from French or British colonization. As a result, he westernized the country's systems in almost all dimensions. Especially, education was seen to have played an essential role in human development. In 1871, a modern school was established along with lay teachers and a managed time-table. The school taught, in particular, male members of the royal family and the sons of the nobility. Three years later, a school for upper class women was established. The Palace Ladies School (Kulasatri Wanglang) or Harriet M. House's school was the first private school for women. It was also the first boarding school for girls, run by missionaries. In the first two years, there were only twenty children of commoners. After Mrs. Cole became the manager, the school became very popular among the royal families, nobles, and high governmental officers, as well as among rich commoners. Modern education for girls was better recognized among the upper class. The studies were general subjects, languages, women's home skills, and western social manners. It is probable that the western atmosphere in Thai society created the demand for girl's modern education. This school produced many capable school principals and teachers who later established women's schools in Bangkok. Most of these teachers were princesses or daughters of nobility. Along with the popularity of the first private women's school, the first governmental



school for commoner women was established during the 1880s (Thomson, 1992; Suksathikan, 1976).

The Command Declaration on Schooling was proclaimed, English was being taught in the palace for royalty and nobles, and schools were set up outside the palace for the education of commoners' children. With the aid of foreign – mainly English – advisers a Department of Education was established by the king in 1887, by which time 34 schools, with over 80 teachers and almost 2,000 students were in operation. In 1897, it was revealed that female education began upon the initiative of Queen Saowapha after King V went on a tour of Europe. During her time as queen she took up many interests, especially issues concerning women. In 1904, she established one of the first schools for girls in Siam; the "Rajini School" or Queen's School in Bangkok. A few years later, at the Queen's behest, a number of girls schools were set up in Siam, albeit somewhat later, in the various provincial centers such as Trang, Ayutthaya, Nakhon Phathom, Chanthaburi and Udon Thani. As for the northeast region, the reform of State administration played an important role in introducing policies from the central to the northeast region. For example, there was the first school for women in the northeast region –the Queen's School in Udon Thani. Therefore, it would be fair to say that the Isaan women in Udon Thani province were the first group to be empowered by the education of central Siam. The expansion of female education gradually became more organized and better planned (Jackson and Cook, 1999; Romanow, 2012)

The development of education continued up until the reign of Vajiravudh, King Rama VI. He had studied abroad, in his opinion Thai women's freedom, rights, and social status were inferior when compared to women in western countries. He strongly believed that woman played a significant role in national development and could be a symbol of a nation's civilization. As a result, he expressed his criticism of and proposals for the Thai women's role in many of

his writings, stage plays, and speeches. He supported and built up schools, driving the issues necessary for free education for both male and female children in primary schools. Regarding women's education, he wished to see Thai women more literate, educated, and up to date (Romanow, 2012; Suksathikan, 1976; Rhein, 2016). On 26 March 1916, he established an institute of higher education and expanded education, beyond the people who would become government officials, to the general public. As a result, he improved the "Civil Service College of King Chulalongkorn" to become Chulalongkorn University. From this time, the disparity between men and women was gradually reduced, not only in Bangkok Monthon (province), but also in the northeast region (Rhein, 2016).

3. The Democracy Revolution and National Economic and Development Plan (between 1932 and 2016 A.D.)

Based on the above section, it was pointed out that the state introduced a series of interventions to promote gender equality in the public sphere that carried on through several decades. It began with King Rama IV (1851-1868) and was carried on by King Rama V (1686-1910) and King Rama VI (1910-1926). After the democracy revolution in 1932, the constitutional monarchy clearly mentioned the equal rights of men and women. Respect for women's equal rights, freedom and dignity was well reflected in Thai legislation, policy, and practices. On 1 October 1935, monogamy was introduced in to Thai family law, along with women's rights in politics, commerce, trade, education, academia, agriculture and the home. The effort of creating gender equality in Thai society, including northeastern society, became more obvious after Mrs. Orapin Chaiyakan became the first Isaan woman to be elected to hold a post in the Thai Parliament. On June 5, 1949, she was elected to become a member of the House of Representatives for Ubon Ratchathani Province. In 1961, there seemed to be reinforcement of the trend of women's empowerment



when the national Council of Women of Thailand (NCWT), a non-profit organization, was established under the support of the Royal Institution and Military government of Field Marshal P. Pibulsongkarm. This organization played a significant role in promoting and supporting women's organizations in the country. It was also the coordinator between national organizations and international organizations. This was a guarantee that, in practice, women could show their concerns and initiate changes whenever and wherever their rights were not fully respected. Moreover, the military government promoted gender equality by encouraging women to work outside the home. Mostly, women's careers emphasized on being a nurse, teacher, tailor or barber (Yapparat, 2006; Thomson, 1992).

Although women received the benefit of more rights and freedoms, they had not yet reaped the benefit of any social or economic process of equality until, in 1975, the United Nations or UN declared 'International Women's Year' by focusing on the development of women. After the declaration by the UN, the Thai government became increasingly aware of the plight of women because Thailand was one of the UN member countries. Certainly, Thailand adopted the International Women's Year Objectives and sent a delegation to participate in the International Women's Conference in Mexico City. As a result of the conference, more attention was paid to the development of women. Additionally, Thai women made up half of the entire population of the country and women's rights remained far inferior to those of men in social, economic, and political terms. During the government of Prime Minister General Chatichai Choonhavan, the Office of Prime Minister established the National Commission on Women's Affairs (NCWA). The NCWA's responsibilities were to formulate policies and plan for the promotion and protection of women rights until they became the long-term women's development plan (1982-2001). This was the first women's development plan that tried to analyze all women's issues— that is health

care, education, economic and occupational inequality, political participation and decision making, revisions and modifications of laws, etc. (National Commission on Women's Affairs, 1994; National Commission on Women's Affairs, 1997).

In Thailand, there have been a total of 11 master plans of National Economic and Social Development since 1961. Economic development and growth was the major target of the first two plans, in which there was no women development policy. Based on a review of the national economic and social development plan, known as the NESD Plan, it was found that, in the 3rd and 4th NESD Plans, women became the target of family planning along with including a guideline for study in the form of out-of-school education and a revision and modification of laws aiming to provide fair treatment of women and to protect female workers in various occupations. In the 5th NESD Plan (1982-1986), women were identified as a specific target group and connected this plan into the long term women's development plan (1982-2001). It was carried through the 6th NESD Plan (1987-1991). In the 7th NESD Plan (1992-1996), the second long-term women's development plan (1992-2011) was inserted into this plan and continued through the 8th - 10th NESD Plans. In the 11th NESD Plan, it focused on changing the attitudes of Thai society towards gender equality while continuing to build women's capacity to enable them to live to their full potential as both actors for and beneficiaries of, national development. The plan also addressed violence against women in its 4th strategy: Enhancing the security of a woman's life and body. The objective was that women should not live their lives in fear of violence, and that their rights to life and physical safety be protected. The forms of violence addressed included domestic violence, community violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and human trafficking (Yothasmutr, 2016).

Referring to the information from this period, it could be said that not only did Thai governments



realize the need for women's development, but also included other countries through being a member of the UN. Democracy was the driving force for women's rights and freedoms and, ultimately, this led to a change in woman's roles and functions. Most importantly, the women's development plans were incorporated into the 3rd – 11th national economic and social development plans, aiming to support a changing world in the near future. In fact, the educational system was developed constantly during the absolute monarchy under the Chakri dynasty; it became fundamental to women's attitudinal change. During Field Marshal Pibulsongkarm's government, women who lived in urban areas began to work outside of the home; most of their careers focused on skills. A few decades later, women's careers had expanded continuously, in accordance with a changing world.

Today, the Thai woman's status, including those from Isaan, has changed from being submissive housewives to be working women who are capable of making decisions and supporting themselves financially. This is because they have greater access to education and have the freedom of movement to work in many fields; also enjoying many of the same rights as men. Besides, the phenomenon of cross-cultural marriage by Isaan women reflects their capability for making decisions in selecting their ways of life, even though they have been condemned – as a prostitute or a minor wife. As for the political dimension, the participation of Isaan women in politics, at various levels of government in Thailand, is likely to be increased continuously, although politics has traditionally been a male preserve (Verick, 2017). Therefore, this period points out that the roles and functions of women in Thailand, including Isaan women, have definitely changed.

Discussion

The research findings pointed out that the Isaan women's roles and functions have been constantly

changing since the first period (between 1 and 1800 A.D.) up until the third period (between 1932 and 2016 A.D.). Especially in the third period, it was revealed that the majority of Isaan women's roles and functions changed from being submissive housewives to be working women. It also included to receive the freedom of movement to work in many field, to access credit and other financial services, to empower the political participation, to empower the decision making. Those changes accorded with the indicators of women empowerment – that is women's labor force participation, women's household decision making and women's political participation (Akpabio, 2012; Dahal, 2013; Kishor and Gupta, 2004). In order to be concise, it could be concluded and discussed in three periods as follows.

Firstly, the period of the arrival of states (between the 1st century and the 18th century or between 1 and 1800 A.D.) implied that women's roles and functions began to be significantly changed from the establishment of the Funan Kingdom onwards, but this was not intensive. This was because the women of the royal court and upper classes had played a significant role in the governing of their country. As for the common women, they still played a significant role in the family. However, women's roles and functions were continually changed in the age of the Tai-Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang and the Tai Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya. During this period, religion was considered to be a crucial determinant of family customs and practices and remained very important in legitimizing patriarchal family ideology. Theravada Buddhism remains the prominent religion of the Khorat Plateau and it continues to exert a strong influence over social values, codes of ethics and day-to-day behavior. Buddhist teachings include principles of 'hierarchical order' that influence 'superordinate and subordinate' social relationships. It was also found that the traditional system of rulers and positions of public power were only for men. Women were considered to be mere assets. Consequently, the



arrivals of Indianisation – such as Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and the patrilineal ideology – were the driving forces that reinforced the woman's status as being inferior and transformed the relationship between men and women from a horizontal perspective to vertical.

Secondly, the period of absolute monarchy under the Chakri Dynasty (between 1801 and 1931 A.D.), revealed that the threat of colonization was the driving force that caused Siam to adapt to a system of 'westernization'. Particularly, in the social dimension, Thai Kings – such as King Rama IV, King Rama V and King Rama VI – realized that human development could keep the country free from colonization by the British or French. Not only could men help develop the country, but women could also and, as a consequence, conceptualizations of women's rights and freedoms emerged. Women in central Siam received the opportunity to study. On the other hand, in the northeast region, the women's status remained lower than the men's, although matrilineage was a special characteristic of the social structure. During the reign of King Rama V, a school for girls and young women (known as the Queen's school) first opened in Udon Thani and covered most of the area of the northeast region during the reign of King Rama VI. Over the next few decades, it was found that Isaan women's education had been increased constantly. During this period, there was no evidence regarding the changes in Isaan women's roles and functions. However, this period reflected the Kings' visions of a changing world and the realization that, in the future, women would play a significant role in national development. Therefore, the educational development of women was in preparation for their driving the country.

Thirdly, the period of the democracy revolution and the national social and economic development plans (between 1932 and 2016 A.D.) was regarded as being significant in generating the changing roles and functions of Isaan women. Based on the review of the 3rd - 11th national social and economic development

plans (1972–2016), it was found that the changing roles and functions of women can be discussed through three dimensions as follows:

1) Socio-culture, why was it that Isaan men had greater educational opportunities than Isaan women? The northeasterners considered that, in the near future, a woman would marry and become a wife; therefore, it was not necessary to educate them. However, the likelihood of an Isaan woman receiving education and working outside of the home, have increased continuously. Today, their careers emphasize on laboring in industry, trade and the service sectors. As for the Isaan women's choice of partner, in the past, it was decided on by their parents. Nowadays, the majority select for themselves; this being a result of their improved education and labor migration. Transnational marriages have become an unprecedented phenomenon in Isaan; reflecting the Isaan woman's expanded decision-making capability. Although this phenomenon may have been accepted, they have still been viewed as 'prostitutes' or as a 'minor wife'. Therefore, it would be fair to say that the women's roles and functions, in the socio-cultural dimensions, have changed which accorded with the previous researches (Promphakping et al., 2008; Lapanun, 2012; Lapanun, 1993; Sriruksa, 2014).

2) According to Sriruksa's research (2014), it was pointed out that it was the economic dimension that pushed Isaan women to raise their own status. Part of this depended on their education while another part was due to generating income for their family by becoming part of the urban labor force. Her findings accorded with this research findings. The findings showed that Isaan women's education and workforce participation had increased continuously. In addition, there have been huge changes for them in terms of employment during the past decades, with women moving into paid employment outside of the home in ways that their grandmothers or even their mothers could only dream of. Today, they are engaged in each



and every occupation. Hence, it would be fair to say that Isaan women have changed from being submissive housewives to become working women who are capable of making decisions and supporting themselves financially.

3) In the political dimension, it was found that Thai women, including Isaan women, have been granted the right of political participation since the democracy revolution of 1932. Also, the NESD plans attempted to encourage women to participate in politics. Nowadays, Isaan women have begun to enter into political careers, although in fairly small numbers. Their political careers could be as head of village, member of the provincial parliament, chief executive of the Provincial Administration Organization, member of the municipal council, mayor, chief executive of the Sub-district Administrative Organization or member of the Sub-district Administrative Organization.

Based on the above discussion through three periods, it was found that Isaan women's roles and functions transformed. Consequently, comparing the women's roles and functions and identifying the causes for these transformations would be mentioned in table 1. Interestingly, it was revealed that the development of Isaan women's roles and functions from period 1 to period 2 spent for 1,800 years and from period 2 to period 3 for 215 years.

Conclusion and Recommendation

To conclude the research findings, it would be fair to say that Isaan women have developed from the reign of King Rama IV up until 2016. (1) Education was the most important fundamental in empowering women. Also, it was the root leading to the change of women's roles and functions. (2) Certainly, this research found that democracy was the essential door that allowed Thai women to follow their opportunities. (3) There are hidden implications in this study that, from the past to the present, there is no gender ideology and gender equality in this region. It can be said that the northeastern society remains a patriarchal society. As for suggestions, in the 21st century, we have found that mass media – such as newspaper, radio, television, satellite TV and Internet – envelopes everything. Furthermore, many previous researchers revealed that mass media played a significant role in empowering women. Consequently, the researcher thinks that this should be considered for study in the next article.

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Table 1 Comparing the Women’s Roles and Functions and Identifying the Causes for these Transformations

Periods	Driving Forces	Women’s Roles	Women’s Functions	Women Status	Timeline for Transforming women’s roles and functions
Period 1 (1-1800 A.D.)	The arrivals of Indianization	A daughter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be responsible for household tasks - To take care of parents, siblings, other relatives - To assist her mother in whatever way was required - To obey her father, brother, uncle or any other male relatives 	Isaan Women’s roles and functions were often marked symbolically as being inferior.	Women’s roles and functions transformed from the period 1 to period 2 around 1,800 years.
		A housewife	To uncomplaining, obedient, submissive, passive, restrained, and tolerant with her husband		
		A mother	To be compassionated and devoted; carrying and shielding her children from harm.		
Period 2 (1801-1931 A.D.)	The arrivals of Theravada Buddhism	Women	To be responsible only for food and doing some cleaning, the same as if they are in the house.	There was the emergence of the conceptualizations of Isaan women’s rights and freedom	
		A daughter	To provide the opportunity the women in the royal families, nobles, high governmental officers, and rich commoners to educate		
		A housewife	To uncomplaining, obedient, submissive, passive, restrained, and tolerant with her husband		
Periods 3 (1932 - 2016 A.D.)	The Democracy of Revolution and the NSDP	A daughter	To access the basic education	-The equal rights and freedoms of men and women have been guaranteed in the constitutional monarchy and proposed the policy through the NSDP.	Women’s roles and functions transformed from the period 2 to period 3 around 215 years.
		A housewife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be the working women - To receive the freedom of movement to work in many fields (such as nurse, teacher, tailor or barer) 		
		A mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To access to credit and other financial services - To empower the political participation - To empower the decision making in household 		

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