การพัฒนาศักยภาพกลุ่มผู้รับงานไปทำที่บ้านด้วยสื่อ ICT ในกลุ่มประเทศอาเซียน

ICTs To Empower ASEAN Homeworkers*

รองศาสตราจารย์ ดร.กมลรัฐ อินทรทัศน์ และ รองศาสตราจารย์ปิยฉัตร ล้อมชวการ
สาขาวิชานิเทศศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสุโขทัยธรรมาธิราช อำเภอปากเกร็ด จังหวัดนนทบุรี 11120

INTRODUCTION

This research is part of a regional research on women homeworkers and their use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) for their work in three countries of South-east Asia – Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. It tries to answer two main questions:-

- **What are the key gender-specific issues and challenges faced by urban poor women homeworkers in Thailand carrying out home-based work?**
- **How can women homeworkers be empowered by the use of ICTs for economic activities and thus take ownership/control of the management of social networks, information sharing and other activities that enable them to work from home and enjoy the full benefits thereof?**

In relation to the above questions, the research project, thus, focuses on the following key areas:

a) The enabling environment or the contexts, structures and mechanisms supporting women homeworkers and their use of ICTs for work;
b) Activities or efforts to address gender issues of urban women homeworkers; and
c) Understanding the potential for ICT-Empowered Women Homeworkers

1) Marginalization of women in the labour market. Although labour force participation of women in Thailand is high, the issues related to womens status in employment and the recognition of the contribution of women in reproductive and productive work is still a concern. The participation in economic activities increases the burden of women as they still bear most of the responsibilities for the domestic work. Household division of labour is still engendered and the introduction of ICT usage may add instead of reduce homeworkers' burden and responsibilities.

2) Invisibility of Women. Many women remain 'invisible' in the production process especially those homeworkers who are subcontractors or waged-homeworkers. They produce parts of end products. They are also not regarded as the main users of technology.

----

3) Masculine culture of technology. In some cultures, there are inherent factors which hinder women from using technology. These factors promote and facilitate the control and mastery of technology by men (Wajcman, 1991). In Thailand, this situation has improved somewhat as women have to some extent gained accessibility as ICT has become affordable, widened its coverage, and became user-friendly. ICT tools have become commonly used to promote gender's equity.

There are two sub-themes related to the issue of masculine culture of technology discussed in this research:

a) 'Woman question in technology'. Here the exclusion of women from technological work is discussed. It tries to examine structural barriers hindering women's participation such as discrimination based on sex in the training, development in employment and the awarding of assistance or grants in projects (Wajcman, 1991). It also considers the differential socialization for boys and girls at home and at schools, which may later translate into women not being comfortable with the use of technology. Women's participation in technology is also related to access to education, training and employment based on gender discrimination.

b) 'Technology question'. These issues relate to the nature and structure of technologies and technology work. Women may be excluded from technological work while in addition the nature and design of technology is not appropriate for women's needs and interests (Wajcman, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Three locations in Thailand were selected for the fieldwork for the research project to be conducted : Bangkok including greater Bangkok, Chiangmai and Khonkaen because of its high concentration of homeworkers together with the presence within the same vicinity of various industries that have high growth potential.

Selection of Homeworkers : The main criteria in selecting the homeworkers from the three Thai study sites are vulnerability (e.g., income level, health status, number of dependents) and actual or potential access to ICTs. Using these criteria, the Thai research team interviewed 75 homeworkers, including 3 male homeworkers and 72 female homeworkers. Of these, 26 are from Bangkok and Greater Bangkok, 24 are from Chiangmai, and 25 are from Khonkaen. From each city, the urban poor areas which have access to ICTinfrastructure were selected.

Selection of Stakeholders : forty sectoral stakeholders who work directly or indirectly with homeworkers: 1) Government agencies (GOs): 19 (47.5%), 2) Non-Government agencies (NGOs): 5 (12.5%), and 3) Private sector and others: 16 (40%)

Research Method : four methods to gather relevant information - interviews, focus group discussions, oral histories and observations for case study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Contexts, structures and mechanisms supporting women homeworkers and their use of ICTs for work
a) Profile of Home-Based Work
After the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, Economic reforms were introduced to strengthen the Small and Medium size Enterprises (SMEs). This effort also stimulated various kinds of domestic production and income generation activities. Homeworkers in Thailand can register with the Ministry of Labour and are divided

into 374 groups/types of homeworkers such as housewives' groups, elderly groups, HIV positive groups. The selection of homeworkers for interview has taken into consideration these different groupings of homeworkers. This research involves two main groups of homeworkers - those who work individually from home and those who work in groups in the vicinity of their home. Those who work in groups may be homepreneurs working with members of their families or employing waged homeworkers on a part or full-time basis in their home-based enterprise).

b) Homeworkers's personal characteristics

Over eighty percent of homeworkers in Thailand are women (Chasombat 1999). The majority of homeworkers interviewed in this study work individually from home, although a significant number work with others as groups (e.g., family-based enterprises). These patterns resemble the findings of the study done by Kasetsart University (1999). Those who work individually from home, may be small scale homeworkers or homepreneurs with others working for them. Homeworkers who work individually are likely to belong to or are registered with groups but may or may not be active members of the group.

The majority of the homeworkers (69%) are married with children, though a significant number of their husbands are working away from home as migrant workers. Those working elsewhere within Thailand return home two to three times a year whereas those working abroad are only able to return every two to three years. A few homeworkers narrated sad tales of 'disappearing' husbands who come and go without informing their wives of their intention.

c) Household and home-based work socio-economic features

Most homeworkers interviewed in Bangkok live in rented dwellings mostly in slums. Workers interviewed in Chiangmai and Khonkaen are more likely to own their house or live in lower or middle class suburban residential areas. The slums in Bangkok are often in the midst of the lower or middle-class residential areas. The front streets may be lined with well constructed link houses for the middle class but behind these are a myriad of squatter settlements with no proper sanitation and drainage. Some have water and electricity supplies, illegally channelled from the main street. While fewer homeworkers in Thailand are exposed to hazardous work and living conditions compared to the past all is not well. In the urban areas, there is overcrowding, lack of ventilation and poor sanitation. The poor sanitation especially in the city slum areas become breeding grounds for mosquitoes and flies and are infested with mice and other disease-carrying vermin. In contrast, around the city fringes the home-based works are in the open air, or in well-ventilated areas.

The household income of the homeworkers interviewed is between US$50 to US$550 per month. The average working hours are 10 to 12 hours per day, and their average income is mostly between US$2 to US$5 per day i.e. the monthly income being between US$50 to US$150. Twenty four homeworkers i.e. 32% earn US$51 to US$150, while 15 Homeworkers (20%) earn US$151 to US$250.

d) Skills and training

The homeworkers interviewed are mainly engaged in the following types of work:

o Garments/Clothes: Sewing, embroidery, clothes decoration, and cloth mattresses 40%)

o Handicraft: Wood carving, weaving, clothes hanger, mulberry papers and products, and artificial flowers (25.5%)

o General home-based work: Food services, decorative items, other types of souvenirs, and factory-related product i.e. powder puff which is not a handicraft (12.4%)

o Local wisdom home-based work: Silk weaving, cotton weaving and decoration, and Benjarong pottery - high-end products which allow home workers to earn higher income (10.6%)
o Fishing net weaving (8%)
o Services: Traditional massage, beauty salon (4%)

The home-based work is primarily centred around the making of creative products with only a few linked to the food-processing industry. Some products like silk and pottery are for niche markets. There is a slight differentiation in the type of homeworking among the three sites as noted below:

e) ICT structures in the community

All of the Thai homeworkers interviewed use telephones (either fixed line or mobile phones) for work and personal purposes. Nearly 100% have their own mobile phones units which they use for their personal and home-based business contacts. The majority of those owning their own units share it, allowing other members of the family to use them. Generally spend around 150 to 250 Baht (about US$7) per month, for their pre-paid card phone.

Among the useful ICT tools in Thailand are the community radio and community broadcasting towers which are very accessible and appropriate for most areas of Thailand. Both tools are encouraged by the government as tools for community development.

Another interesting ICT tool in addition to the community radio is Cable TV. It is widely subscribed to because of its low fee (about 300 Baht/US$7 per month) and its wide service coverage especially in the urban areas. While it creates more interest, it is less accessible than the community radio to homeworkers for business due to higher charges.

Cheap ICT tools include the VCD and the DVD. Although the software and hardware for these forms of media are affordable for both urban and rural people, costing as little as US$30 for a VCD or DVD player, their main content focuses on entertainment. Only a few agencies are starting to produce this kind of media for training and people empowerment.

2) Activities or efforts to address gender issues of urban women homeworkers

Both groups of homeworkers i.e. piece-rate or waged homeworkers and the homepreneurs face challenges. The waged homeworkers' have challenges with meeting urgent deadlines, completing and delivering their products, obtaining a fair price for their labour, meeting product quality control as well as health related issues. The homepreneurs are challenged with the basics of how to run their business by themselves i.e. investment, quality production and marketing. It normally takes homepreneurs five years to handle the multiple aspects they are confronted with and establish their business even though they have received continuous support from various agencies including SME training programmes, SME Bank loans, and the Export Promotion Department. Networks both formal and informal i.e. their customers, employers, group members, and marketing networks are essential. Both groups are in search of solutions to build their capacity and access resources beneficial to their development.

Action towards ICT-enabled home-based work

There is a lack of access to ICT training for more effective use for promotion and sales. Most homeworkers have not received training on the use of ICT tools. The government agencies blamed homeworkers for the lack of interest in training. The reason for this apparent lack of interest is possibly due to insufficient awareness among homeworkers regarding the benefits of such tools beyond their present usage

and the heavy dual burden of work and the homeworkers family responsibilities as evident in the earlier discussions on the gender division of labour both in reproductive and productive work with the women assuming full responsibility for domestic duties. The extension staff members servicing homeworkers, often lack exposure to the wider use of ICTs for work. These organizations and their staff primarily focus on providing economic, income-generating assistance.

3) Understanding the potential for ICT-Empowered Women Homeworkers.

The problems, challenges and opportunities faced by the homeworkers, together with the gender issues are simultaneously linked to gender norms related to intra-household gender relations; notions of women and work and notions of women and technologies. Transforming gender relations for women homeworkers to use ICTs requires gender justice in all of these areas.

a) Preventing marginalization of women in the labour force

Most home-workers interviewed conveyed their past feelings of 'low self-confidence'. Because they have little education they feel that they are 'not respected and not recognised for their contribution' by their own families or the communities. They are normally regarded as 'just housewives' whose main role is to serve the family, and be dependent on their husbands. These images of the 'lowly' women, born to suffer and be a 'martyr' for the happiness and well-being of her husband and children, are often reinforced in the television programmes popular among the housewives and homeworkers.

b) Making women visible in the economy

With the continuous efforts and supportive policies of the Thai government to eradicate poverty and promote entrepreneurship, the homeworkers and homepreneurs have enhanced their confidence in 'themselves' and become more 'visible'. Some of them became breadwinners of the family, group leaders, or community leaders as they help others venture into being business-owners or homepreneurs. The OTOP product champions are an inspiration to other women homeworkers.

c) Transformation of meanings attached to gender and technology

Homeworkers generally have a positive attitude toward ICTs although they think that they are not educated enough to use these tools. Their children, and sometimes their husbands, are the ones who use ICTs. Television and radio are still regarded as primarily for entertainment in most households though with the busy schedule, most homeworkers hardly concentrate on the programme. Both are good sources of information for their work especially for those in business related to fashion and creativity. They confess that these are good sources of knowledge and information concerning the current trends which will impact their production.

d) Resolving women in technology question

Participant observation, particularly through the case studies, reveals much about the norms and practices relative to women's access, use and control of ICTs. The barrier to developing women's capability to use technologies, especially ICT's, runs deep in Thai culture. Perception of technology (e.g., computers as complicated machines), together with limited or non existent English skills, is the main barrier to Internet use. Among the homeworkers, the use of the computer and the Internet is perceived to be complicated both in its functions and its language requirements. The cost of computers is high relative to the homeworkers' general income. The lower end homeworkers do not see the need for computers and Internet.

e) Resolving the technology question

Mobile phones are almost ubiquitous at the research sites. The government, especially the Taksin-headed government, in collaboration with supportive companies in the private sector like Shinawarta, made mobile phones very cheap and widely available. It is observed that homeworkers seldom use short messaging. The explanation given is that at the initial stages, SMS and phone calls were promoted at the same cost (3 Baht per call or SMS). Being a less literate group, the homeworkers prefer to speak rather than SMS. Although currently SMS (0.5Baht per SMS) is much cheaper than calls (3 Baht per minute call), the homeworkers still prefer to speak rather than SMS. Older homeworkers complained of difficulties in using the small keys to send messages while less literate ones found spelling out their intended message laborious. Consequently verbal calls seem quicker and easier.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of 75 homeworkers in Bangkok, Chiangmai and Khonkaen has provided insights into the work and lives of single homeworkers who work alone as subcontractors or waged homeworkers as well as homepreneurs who work with others in a group or employ other homeworkers. With the recognition and concerted, systematic development efforts of homeworkers by the Thai government, many homeworkers have combined work experience, local wisdom, traditional skills with innovative and creative designs to produce value-added or niche products for domestic and international markets. As part of the 'One Tambon One Product' (OTOP) project, homeworkers are organised into groups and assisted to evolve from single homeworkers into groups of homepreneurs producing complementary high quality products for niche markets.

To prevent those who are unable to organise and work in groups or have poor quality products from becoming marginalised, **there is a need for the implementation of policies and plans by the relevant government agencies to cater for homeworkers who operate as individuals, i.e. piece-rate, subcontractors and waged workers of homepreneurs, who lack bargaining power.** The policies should protect them and accord them benefits. They have to be supported and given access to the many resources and assistance provided by the various sources and agencies regardless of whether they form groups. It is important that all the relevant agencies be dedicated to serve these homeworkers and guide them patiently to become the qualified and sustainable 'Community Business SME' or 'Business SME'. The relevant agencies have to act as their 'mentor or coach' to facilitate them systematically and dynamically.

Homepreneurs and homeworkers' groups, **need a form of 'one stop service centre' with continuous out-reach programmes to disseminate more information.** This would include providing the necessary 'know how', and information concerning 'best practices', 'fair trade', 'green globe', free trade, and other news and events in general. While this group of homeworkers are able to access many resources, the relevant agencies can help top-up and train and equip them to attain the required qualifications.

The relevant agencies can also help the individual homeworkers as well as the homepreneurs to naturally tap into each other's strengths and network with each other. **Relevant agencies should promote networking amongst homeworkers drawing on simple and affordable ICT tools and applications.** This would be especially helpful to expand their network and access relevant information concerning

training, study trips; different levels of marketing outlets and receive orders especially from overseas. Such access will expose both groups to more opportunities, different perspectives, and ideas about networks for their future development. Consideration should be given to ensure that recommendations are applicable, appropriate to the homeworkers lifestyle and work, user friendly, in their own language and affordable/cost efficient making them worthy of their efforts to learn and their investment.

With the Thai government promoting the use of ICT and facilitating its penetration into the world of the homeworkers, all the homeworkers interviewed have access to phones (fixed or mobile), radio including community radio and broadcasting towers and television. Efforts and policies are continuously made to increase the affordability of these ICT tools and promote their use for community and business development. The community radio and broadcasting towers are examples of efforts to decentralize and promote the use of ICT for local development. **The research reveals the need for gender sensitization and training in community education and local development programmes.** With some training, including gender awareness and sensitization together with exposure to ICT possibilities, the local managers of these facilities can better serve the homeworkers' needs and enhance their knowledge and capabilities. This will be particularly beneficial in improving gender relations, gender equality and removing the feeling of inadequacy related to technology.

Phones, especially mobile phones, are extensively used for communicating business transactions including orders from overseas. Although mobile phones are widely used, the full potential has not been exploited. Currently homeworkers use it mainly for verbal communication. Its great potential as a tool for business can be better and more cost-effectively used if **simple applicable software is designed and made available for homeworkers to overcome language differences to send designs to customers and access orders sent to them.**

The Thai government is quite advanced in providing ICT physical infrastructure (e.g., e-Thailand, ICT Cities Piloting Project in all main cities of Thailand such as Khonkaen ICT City in Khonkaen province). Combined with the OTOP project, holistic and continuous support and policies have assisted all levels of homeworkers in Thailand, both directly and indirectly, to access the outside world using their 'local wisdom' or 'local assets' which have never been 'valued' before. The OTOP project was one among the relevant projects could help revive these values, and eventually help change their social status as well as uplift their quality of life. **The relevant agencies and the academic institutions can help empower the homeworkers by educating and transferring current and untapped local wisdom to the new generations more effectively and teaching them to implement it more successfully.**

Appendix

Photo Essay

Enabling Environment for Homeworkers and Use of ICT

Homeworkers's Personal Characteristics

All the homeworkers in the research are within legal working age, the oldest being 80 and the youngest 23. Of the 75 homeworkers interviewed,
33% are between 30-39,
24% between 40-49 and
24% between 50-59.

The majority of homeworkers are married with children. Many husbands are working away from home in other cities or abroad. The homeworkers, often helped by their daughters earn to provide for their family. They earn between $50-550 per month.

Homeworkers, who are single mothers, divorced or widowed, bear responsibility for young and old dependants. They in turn help in the home-based work.

Skills and Training

Some of the skills in home-based work are passed from generation to generation. Few skills are gained from formal school education.

Household and home-based socio-economic features

Most homeworkers in Bangkok live in rented dwellings mostly in the slum. The many pairs of shoes outside of the house reflect the large number of tenants and 'temporary' occupants.

After the Asian Financial Crisis, many assistance programmes for Poverty Eradication, encouraged retrenched migrant workers to enter home-based work. This "doughnut lady", works almost all day long, to survive on her own in one of Chiang Mai's poor downtown villages. With low investment cost, making doughnuts supports her daily subsistence and allows her to send some amount to her parents. She bought the oven through a loan from "One Million Baht Village Development Fund" but the oven is not used as she cannot afford to buy the materials necessary to complete the production process, which is very expensive compared to earnings from her doughnut orders.

Homeworkers are facilitated to organize into groups of <10, elect leaders and have clear operating objectives. They receive assistance under the '*One Tambon One Product*' (OTOP) Project

The OTOP committee involves experts to assist homeworkers to improve the quality of their products. Homeworkers are guided to organize themselves, design name cards, develop brand names for their products and create niche markets. Even name cards evolve from simple to informative and attractive ones, reflecting the gradual increase in capability of homeworkers.

ICT Structures in the Community

The radio and television are constant companions of the homeworkers. They provide entertainment and information and are a source of learning. However, many programmes reinforce images of the women as the 'martyr' for the happiness and well-being of her husband and children.

Telephones, fixed or mobile are available everywhere in Bangkok, Chiangmai and Khonkaen. The public phones are accessible to those who do not own phones. The yellow sign in a shop in Chiangmai, advertises the availability of pre-paid cards for mobile phones. Such shops are common. All homeworkers in the study have access to phones and use them for their work. Verbal calls are more popular than Short Messaging.

Activities to Address Gender Equality and Empowerment Issues
Promotion of Awareness of Gender Gaps and Acceptance of Need for Change

Homeworkers unable to meet requirements of government to organize, have to work for others or become marginalized without the same benefits as groups.

Homeworkers often sacrifice their own leisure and rest for the family's needs and wants. The nylon bag weaver believes that it is culturally obligatory for her to wait up for her taxi driver husband who comes home at 1 or 2 a.m. every night. She makes her bags while waiting for him, not even willing to nap even though she is exhausted.

Action towards ICT enabled Home-based Work
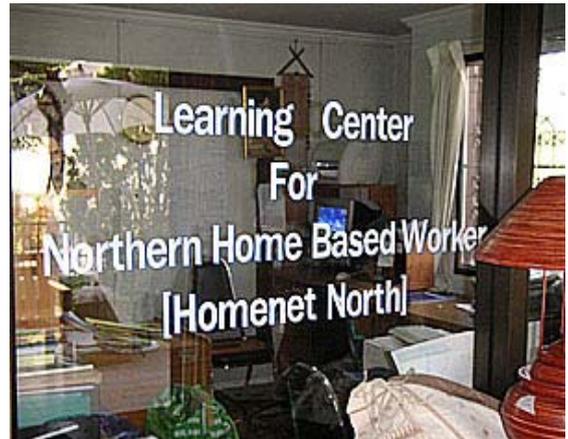
Homenet's learning centre based in Chiangmai**,** conducts activities to help the single homeworkers improve their production skills: dyeing, coloring, marketing **Prae Pran Shop** an NGO showroom of the Weaving Group in Khonkaen also conducts training on dyeing, colouring, marketing. Much of this information is sourced from the internet.

Resolving the Technology Question

In this Chiangmai community radio station, a volunteer DJ clicks the computer mouse to surf the Internet and look for interesting information that would provide new knowledge and entertainment for the community including homeworker groups. Homeworkers can advertise for workers and put out orders for products over the radio.

Using the telephone to contact contractors or group and network members is common among heads of homeworkers' groups. At the meeting, they learn and share all kinds of information among their network to help simplify both the production and improve their family life.

Preventing Marginalisation of Women in the Labour

When she lost her job during the Asian Financial Crisis, she contemplated suicide. With the encouragement of relatives and friends, she ventured into pottery making, combining traditional skills with innovative designs to create value-added high quality '*Benjarong*' pottery.

CITATIONS

- Ames, Angeline and Todd Ames. 2001. Women's Poverty, Social Welfare, and State-Economic Development Policies in Northern Thailand. Working paper for International Sociological Association Conference on Poverty, Social Welfare, and Social Policy. [http://www.uniovi.es/Congresos/2001/RC19/papers/ames_A&T/pdf, accessed 12 May 2005]

- Arunyawej, Wilasinee. 2003. An Evaluation of Homeworkers Group: A Case Study of Nakhon Si hammarat Province, Thesis Master of Economics Bangkok: Kasetsart University. (In Thai)

- Chasombat, Pradit. 1999. Appropriated Models for Developing Homeworkers, R&D Report, Bangkok: Faculty of Economics Kasetsart University. (In Thai)

- Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute. 2002. Outsourcing of Manufacturing to Household: Home-based work in Thailand, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute.

- Department of Industrial Promotion, Belgium Associated Development Centre and CARE. 2000. Off-Farm Job Creation Project –OJC: Self Evaluation Report. Bangkok: Ministry of Industry. (In Thai)

- ILO Bangkok Area Office, ILO East Asia. 2002.

- Multidisciplinary Advisory Team and HomeNet Thailand. Impact of the Economic Crisis on Homeworkers In Thailand / HomeNet Thailand. [URL: http://labourdoc.ilo.org/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?v1=5&ti=1,5&SAB1=homeworkers&... accessed : 6 January 2005]

- Na Lamphun, Bundit and Nittaya Nualsiri. 1999. Database Survey on the Number, Situation, and Problems of Homeworkers in the Upper North of Thailand, *Asian-Pacific Newsletter* 2: *34-35*. [http://www.ttl.fi/Internet/English/Information/Electronic+journals/Asian-Pacific+Newsletter/1999-02, accessed 12 May 2005]

- Office of National Statistics and Ministry of Information and Communication Technology. 2002. Year 2002 Home Work Survey, Bangkok: Office of National Statistics. (In Thai)

- Rakawin, Leechanawanichpan, 1997. Homeworkers' Attitude Toward the Draft Policy on Promotion and Protection of the Homeworkers: A Case Study of the Homeworkers in the Garment Industry in Dindaeng District, Bangkok. Thesis Master of Political Science. Bangkok: Kasetsart University. (In Thai)

- Soonthorndhada, Amara and Sirinan Kittisuksathit. 2004. Promoting Rural Women's Economic Leadership: A Case Study on Participation in Income Generating Activities in Kachanaburi. Bangkok : Institute for Population and Social Research Mahidol University.
  (In Thai)

- Srikajorn, Daonoi. 2004. Supporting Potential Exporters: A Case Study of The Northern Home-based Workers Network, Thailand, Paper prepared for project 'Supporting Potential Women Exporters' CTI 34/2003 T, APEC Committee on Trade and Investment September 2004. [http://ww.nsi-ns.ca/english/pdf/women_exporters_thailand.pdf. Accessed 12 May 2005]

- Wajcman, Judy, 1991,Feminism Confronts Technology, Cambridge, Polity Press.