

CSR and Women Empowerment: A Comparative Study of Women in the Mining Community in Thailand and Lao PDR

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Abstract

The mining industry has considerable potential to help reduce poverty and accelerate human development, through the promotion of gender equity, by increasing government and community revenues and generating employment among women in the community. Most mining multinational corporations (MNCs) exercise their political economy power through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Most CSR activities by mining MNCs focus on improving economic status and conditions of the local community. Most mining MNCs, however, have been striving to adopt business ideologies and developmental practices that promote equity among men and women. However, it is reported that women in the mining industry still struggle to be at the similar level to men economically and socially. In this paper, we explore the impacts of CSR activities by mining industry in Lao PDR and Thailand. Findings from this study confirm that Thai women remain skeptical about roles and gender issues in the mining industry. A comparative aspect between Thailand and Lao PDR shows that women in the mining community aspire for equity among people of all backgrounds (gender, education, age, and location) to work in this industry. Thai women may perceive employment opportunities as a mean to re-migrate to live with family. They also relate issues on economic empowerment from mining industry to political participation by women in Thailand.

Keywords: CSR, responsibility, international business, mining.

1. Introduction

The mining industry has considerable potential to help reduce poverty and accelerate human development, through the promotion of gender equity, by increasing government and community revenues and generating employment among women in the community (Pimpa, 2013). The management of mining impacts in developing countries, however, can be complex and challenging for all stakeholders. Extraction of natural resources such as mining is limited within a particular geographical area. Often its activities are conducted in or near communities and have direct or indirect impacts on community resources, capabilities and well-being, thus leading to a state of poverty, violent behavior, and resentment by communities towards businesses, and other forms of human deprivation such as water and air pollution, land access, farming and toxicity. Previous studies (e.g. Jamali and Mirshak, 2007) also confirm that several factors can be attributed to gender disengagement practices among stakeholders in mining industry such as mining multinational corporations (MNCs), local authorities, community, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local government agencies. The failure to promote engagement among these stakeholders, and existing unstable and weak national institutions, leads to gender-based disadvantages (Tokoro, 2007).

Whilst there is evidence of increasing effective and sophisticated developmental activities on gender equity by mining MNCs, there is no clear understanding on various approaches adopted by mining MNCs. Due to their significant economic and social roles, we need to understand how mining MNCs promote gender equity, and integrate women into their operations. More importantly, factors promoting women in international business organizations (such as mining MNCs) must be comprehended in order to support long-term strategies to empower and promote women in this male-dominated industry.

As gender equity in international business is a salient issue, it has been rather difficult for mining MNCs to state unawareness of their contribution in this area (Calvano, 2008). This, however, has not led to constraints on mining MNCs to behave according to norms that would be conducive to mitigate this important issue in host countries such as Lao PDR and Thailand. Despite ongoing 'boom' conditions in the international mining industry, women remain substantially and unevenly under-represented in the sector, as is the case in other resource-dependent countries. Discrimination of women in the workplace and wider community means they often are grossly under-represented in this new economic activity. It is important to elucidate factors underlying this condition, in order to enhance gender inclusiveness and, ultimately, community economic development. Although the governments of Lao PDR and Thailand place a high priority on gender equity and reducing poverty, disproportionately women from both countries still struggle to overcome poverty, and gain equitable social, political and economic participation. In both countries, where the concept of gender equality remains debatable, there is evidence to show that women bear the greatest responsibility in the rural economy and that empowering rural women economically is key to unlocking rural development.

Why Women and Mining?

For women in particular, the mining industry can provide opportunities for a better life, including increased employment opportunities, access to revenues, and expanded investment in the local community (The World Bank, 2013). Women-led businesses can flourish in the extractives supply chain. Working with and investing in women also makes good business sense - for example, many companies are recruiting women to drive trucks and operate machinery, as they have often found women employees to have an impressive safety record and reduced maintenance of equipment. Literature in this area also shows that when women engage with/in mining industry where they have access to employment, or are empowered regarding household finances, they are more likely to invest in education, health, and nutrition for their families. Where women have decreased access to employment, and to cash, families suffer (The World Bank, 2013).

More importantly, opening job opportunities to women can increase productivity and reduce costs. Women are often more reliable, follow rules, obey health and safety regulations, and can be more reliable employees (The IFC, 2013). It is important to understand the need to significantly alter workplace policy and practice in order to promote such participation and economic empowerment in mining industry. In many natural resource-rich locations in rural Southeast Asia, development of these resources, especially through mining, is becoming the dominant economic activity and source of employment for men and women. In this regard, discrimination of women in the workplace and wider community means they often are grossly under-represented in this new economic activity. It is important to elucidate factors underlying this condition, in order to enhance gender inclusiveness and, ultimately, community economic development. The macro-economic case for women's economic development is well-established (e.g. Kabeer and Natali, 2013).

The World Bank (2016) has noted that “eliminating barriers that discriminate against women working in certain sectors or occupations could increase labour productivity by as much as 25 per cent”. The International Finance Corporation (2013) has gone further, establishing that whereas decent work standards, including gender equity, can promote inclusive growth, their absence may retract growth. The broad question the author seeks to address in this paper is whether mining industry indeed serves its purposes in the host countries (Thailand and Lao PDR), particularly in relation to improving gender equality and the quality of life of women in the mining community.

Why Thailand and Lao PDR?

Thailand and Lao PDR are the key locations for this study because of their socio-cultural contrasts and similarities. Lao PDR has long suffered rural poverty that impacts indigenous people or vulnerable groups with little economic opportunity. The majority of Laos’ rural environmental poor live in marginal dry land and wet land areas and their numbers are likely to increase in the future with global warming. In Thailand, urban poverty is prevalent and manifested by, for example, sanitation and environmental conditions, the poor economic status of migrant workers, and inadequate housing and infrastructure. In developing countries such as Lao PDR and Thailand, the legitimacy of MNCs has been increasingly questioned in recent years. The rise of MNCs in South East Asia has been evident since the end of the cold war. This has persisted during the era of trade liberalization in South East Asia. MNCs contribute to both countries by means of a raft of economic and social actions such as job creation, promotion of education and training and human rights (Pimpa & Moore, 2015).

Although Lao PDR has made impressive progress in economic growth, with the proportion of poor people falling from 39 per cent of the population in the mid-1990s to 27.6 per cent in 2010, poverty among women remains most common in mountainous regions where the majority of the country's ethnic minority peoples live. In upland areas, the poverty rate is as high as 43 per cent, compared with about 28 per cent in the lowlands (Rural Poverty Portal, 2012). The poorest groups in the lowlands are those who have been resettled from mountain regions (AusAID, 2004). The UNDP confirms the most disadvantaged households among Laotians are those which are located in areas vulnerable to natural disasters; have no livestock; include a large number of dependents; and are headed by women (UNDP, 2008).

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)'s Human Development Report 2010, the Lao People's Democratic Republic is one of the 10 "top movers" in the world in terms of progress on human development over the past 20 years. However, the country remains one of the poorest and least developed in South-East Asia. Although improvement is evident against social indicators, human development is still among the lowest in the region (Thuvachote, 2011). One of the key problems is poverty among ethnic groups in Lao PDR. The concentration of the Lao PDR's ethnic groups in remote and inaccessible upland areas contributes to conditions of chronic poverty among them (Crilley, 2012). The condition of poverty among women in Thailand is different from Lao PDR. Most prominent agencies in Thailand and from the international arena acknowledge poverty is as much a political as it is an economic issue (World Bank, 2005; ADB, 2010).

Prior to the Asian financial crisis in 1997, Thailand made rapid progress in economic development, with the poverty level falling from 33 percent in 1990 to 14.75 percent in 1996 (Vora-Sittha, 2012). In both countries, the governments focus on different strategies to empower women and girls. Poverty among women in Lao PDR and Thailand remain crucial and need ongoing strategies from various stakeholders. The World Bank (2012) suggests shared prosperity, responsibilities and mutual collaboration are crucial to sustained alleviation of poverty in the region. One important aspect which is evident in Lao PDR and

Thailand (Vora-Sittha, 2012) is MNCs from various sectors must work with local government to empower the poor by allowing it to participate in economic and political processes in order to guarantee legitimate transfer of power to the poor. In this regard MNCs can be key actors in Lao PDR and Thailand because of their significant economic and social contributions to both countries. The impact of mining industry and companies on women in both countries are relevant to modern economic development. Mining companies often operate in areas of developing countries, such as Lao PDR and Thailand, which are characterized by limited governmental presence, a high incidence of poverty, a lack of basic social infrastructure, and other social and political problems (AusAID, 2004).

2. Research Methodology

Locations Thailand: Tab Klor (ทับคล้อ) and Khao Jed Luke (เขาเจ็ดลูก), Pijit, Thailand

Tabklor and Khao Jed Luke are two districts in Pijit province, Thailand. They are located in the West of Pijit. Originally, the key economic activities in this area are rice farming and animal husbandry. Tabklor's original name was Tab Taklor (the place for Ta Klor tree), due to its fertile land and high volumes of Ta Klor tree in this area. This area is home to Chatree goldmine, operating by Akara Resources Pltd. Akara is a subsidiary of Kingsgate Consolidated Limited; an Australian Securities Exchange ("ASX") listed company. The Kingsgate Group held 48.2% of our outstanding share capital as of June 30, 2013.



Figure 1: Tub Klor Area

Chatree, Thailand's first and largest gold mine, is 280km north of Bangkok and consists of 840 hectares. It commenced open cut mining in 2001. Since commissioning of the Chatree Mining Complex in November 2001, and up to June 30, 2013, the mine has produced over 1.3 million Oz of gold and over 5.8 million Oz of silver. In the year ended June 30, 2013, Akara resources produced 133K Oz of gold at a total cash operating cost of US\$767 per Oz after royalty (Akara resources, 2014). Our research team randomly selected nine villages from the mining community in both districts as study site in Thailand. Then, the chief office of the district was contacted to obtain permission to interview villagers who are qualified to participate in this study.

Lao PDR: Vilabouly (ວິລະບູລີ)

Vilabouly is a district in Savannakhet province. It is also a host to Sepon mine, the country's first significant foreign mining in 2002. Sepon is an open-pit copper and gold-mining operation in Southern Laos. Lane Xang Minerals Ltd. (LXML) is the registered name of the company that operates the Sepon mine. Lan Xang is the Lao name for the Kingdom of Laos, and means 'one million elephants'. MMG LXML owns 90 per cent of Sepon in partnership

with the government of Laos which owns 10 per cent. Sepon gold project commenced production in 2002; its copper operation commenced in 2005.



Figure 2: Vilabouly

In February 2015 the Lao Government acknowledged that Vilabouly District, where the Sepon mine is located, has graduated from the list of 46 poorest districts in the Lao PDR (MMG, 2015). Vilabouly is also home to various ethnic groups such as Bru, Phu Tai, Tai leu etc. The ethnic minority communities within Vilabouly district comprise broadly of Phouthai and Mon-Khmer speaking communities. Interpreters were employed to facilitate the interview with participants who speak Mon-Khmer in this study. From 46 villages in this area, the researcher randomly selected seven villages in Vilabouly district. They include (i) Ban Vangyang, (ii) Namkeep, (iii) Ban Noonsomboon, (iv) Padong, (v) Bounghkam, (vi) Nongkadeang, and (vii) Ban Huay Suan. The researcher then contacted all heads of village to ask for permission to visit the village, and to interview members of the village who work or previously worked with a mining company.

3. Data Collection

Ultimately, qualitative samples are drawn to reflect the purpose and aims of the study. The data for this paper tap into extensive rounds of fieldwork undertaken between 2013 and 2016 in two mining communities in Thailand and Lao PDR. In Lao PDR, we selected participants from seven villages. We interviewed 76 participants from seven villages (including workers from mining company, community leaders, family members of the workers, men and women from different ethnic groups). 62 per cent of the participants are women. Interviews were conducted in Lao, Bru and Phu Tai languages. The interviews were supported by our partners in Lao PDR (National University of Laos, Burnett Institute, and MMG LXML). Since the prevailing concept for sample size in qualitative studies is “data saturation,” the researcher stopped the interview in Laos when the data is saturated.

In Thailand, we interviewed 43 participants from nine villages located in the mining area in Tubklor and Khao Jed Luke Districts. We selected workers from the mining company, community leaders, family members of workers from the mining company, and policy makers from the local province. 68 per cent of the participants were women. All interviews were conducted at the participants’ respective households and offices. The extensive data collected and the various site visits allowed us to compare, and gain a comprehensive understanding of local gender and business dynamics within communities, the forms of activities taking place, and the plight of stakeholders in mining industry.

Data collected from the various sources also allowed for triangulation, or relevant comparisons of different data inputs and points of view, to minimize bias and allow for an objective characterization to emerge.

4. Findings and Discussion

Gender and Economic Status

The establishment of mining industry in both countries has provided tremendous economic opportunities for women in the local community. Access to resources, such as income and facilities provided by the companies, helps promote roles of women in the local communities. In both countries, traditionally, women may find difficulty in gaining economic benefits through formal employment, due to inequality among men and women in educational and various other social opportunities. Women in Tab Klor and Vilabouly referred to similar terms such as 'low education', 'poverty', 'inability to achieve goals in life' when we asked them to identify their status prior to the establishment of mining industry in their communities. Obviously, most women in this study agree that economic benefits from mining industry are associated to different and, perhaps, better status of women who can work and look after themselves and family.

"Opportunities to work in the mining sector help us regain status in the family and community" (Thai woman, 35 years)

"I now can support my kids to study at a local vocational school because of the salary I earn from the company." (Thai woman, 46 years)

In Vilabouly, it comprises members from Laos, Non-Laos and ethnic minorities. While we were working in the field, we observed that the major occupations in Vilabouly include (1) mining-related work, (2) agricultural sector, and (3) small and medium enterprise. Prior to the advent of mining industry in the community, most people work in the farm and forest. Some may continue their work when mining industry was introduced to the community. Some changed their career from agricultural sector into mining. Relationship between mining and women in the community is tied closely.

From the interviews with various members of the Vilabouly community, we learn that Mining industry creates tremendous economic opportunities for women in Vilabouly and those who migrate to work and reside in Vilabouly. Women can engage in various types of work and economic opportunities from mining industry. The obvious economic opportunities for women in Vilabouly include mining-related work, business with mining company, business for workers of the company, and skill building programs by mining company.

"The company allows me to work in the lab although most of the workers in my department are men." (Lao woman, 32)

Working for mining company in Vilabouly is perceived as a high-status job for women since it involves with big multinational corporations. Most women who work in mining industry stated that employment from the company provides not only income but also opportunity to engage in various activities provide by the company. Economic independence from mining is clearly important as an ideology to promote equity. Interestingly, most men who participated in this study also agree that economic opportunities provided by mining industry will have a long-term impact on promoting women as 'leader' and 'action-taker' in the community and family

Comparing with Lao PDR, women residing in Thabklor and Khao Jed Luke districts (Thailand) have different views on the relationship between economic benefits and gender equality. Traditionally, women in this community work in the rice field or do not work at all.

It is the role of men to look after family. The majority of Thai women living in this community do not have opportunity to pursue their formal education after year six at school. This point limits their economic choice in life. Although women show interests in working in mining industry, most of them are limited by lack of educational qualifications, experiences, and skills. Local women addressed the lack of proper education as the key impediment for women to thrive in this industry. Lack of education can be seen as the old Thai way of thinking that family resources should be spent for education for boys, instead of girls. Women also lack opportunities in access to skill development for employment.

“I suggest company to promote education opportunities for women and girls in the local area.” (Thai woman, 36 years)

“Vocational training can promote gender equality among men and women. I believe the company should provide some training schemes such as technology or agricultural training to support women.” (Thai woman, 27 years)

Most mining-related jobs are perceived as ‘male jobs’ in this community. It, therefore, pronounced the role of men as the breadwinner and leader of the community. When we asked Thai women in this community to identify economic opportunities that are related to ‘women’, most of them referred to ability to stay home and look after kids since their family members can work for the company. They also perceive economic benefits from mining company, such as schools, village funds, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, as the key benefits for their children or family, not for women.

Gender and Political Status

Mining industry is renowned as the industry of politics, due to its complex nature and involvement with various stakeholders. The numerous social and environmental issues associated with the mining industry include access to land issues at the exploration and mining stages, environmental pollution, damage to the health of affected communities and the increased mechanisation of the industry, which negatively impacts employment levels (Mitchell, 1999; Cottrell and Rankin, 2000; Hilson and Murck, 2001). In both communities, we witness the involvement of women in political activities and agenda created by mining companies. Political roles of women in the mining communities in both countries are eclectic. Women in Vilabouly community have long been engaging in various political activities through the Women Union. Through this formal political mechanism, the members of Vilabouly’s women union have responsibility for advocating for women’s rights and gender concerns. They also work with various stakeholders, including mining company, on policies, plans and practices of both government and non-government organizations with respect to the needs and status of women in the local area.

With economic empowerment activities from the industry, women can participate more in political roles in the community. We started to witness female village head, female head of the village funds, and women representatives in the village committee. This point is crucial from socio-political perspective. When business engage in various political activities and the provision of public goods (i.e. healthcare, education) in Lao PDR, it increases women’s participation in political policies and actions. More women have been actively engaging in policies such as relocation of the villagers, schools for local children, and CSR programs by mining company.

“As a woman, I feel the companies provided me with better opportunities to engage in education planning with a primary school.” (Lao woman, 27 years)

We also witness women of diverse groups (ethnic, age, and linguistic backgrounds) participate in political-related activities such as income generation schemes by the local

Government and mining company, village funds management for women, and management of women informal activities in the community. In Thailand, a vast majority of women we interviewed still prefer to work in agriculture, stay at home, and look after family. This traditional view of women's role in Thailand remains common in this society. However, some women took active roles in political engagement in the community. We observe that female participation in political affairs related to mining industry is evident. Similar to most mining communities worldwide, environmental degradation has been the major criticism of the industry in Pijit. Although the company has claimed that it has an "outstanding occupational and health record coupled with stringent environmental controls that help underpin the existing operations.", the mine has faced complaints and law suits filed by communities and villager groups in the past, led by female activists, mainly related to claims about the environment and health.

"I lead a team to fight against the environmental issues created by mining industry in our community. Simply, I do it to protect my family and my children." (Thai women, 46 years)

Thai women who lead the environmental and health and safety NGOs are local dwellers. They expressed their concerns on low participation among women in the community in political policies by the Government. In fact, all village leaders and heads of the municipal administration (อบต.) in the mining community are male. Women can only play a pivotal, and active, political role in the NGO and/or informal groups.

"We still feel the limitation for women to engage in the local political actions with the mining community." (Thai woman, 33 years)

Our team discussed this issue with female villagers regarding this issue. All of them are fully aware of the environmental consequences of the industry and the closure of the mine. They, however, do not see their roles in political participation. Instead, most of them were calling for a speedy resolution for the conflict between the community and mining company, as there are 1100 jobs at the mine which are in jeopardy. Most of them expressed that loss of these jobs would have adverse flow on effects to the local communities. The status of female activists in the community can be ambiguous.

For those who support them, they expressed terms such as 'heroine', 'iron flower', 'strong lady', or 'community leader' to describe these female activists. On the other hands, terms such as 'not knowing their places', 'wannabe', 'try hard', 'money-oriented women', or 'stubborn women' were used to described them by the opponents of NGOs. For those who disagreed with women's political participations in the community, they criticised female activists for using femininity to bargain for their own benefits (i.e. financial returns from the company, fame, and status in the community).

Interestingly, leading the community and other women in the politics of mining is not of men interests for a number of reasons. Most women addressed that men are 'too busy' with work commitment. Most men and women who work in mining industry also addressed that the issue is sensitive and they do not want to risk their career by involving in the politics of mining. Women who lead the community and advocating social issues also perceive that men are less active than women in advocating equity and societal issues in the community.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that sustainable CSR efforts can be instrumental in obtaining necessary resources or stakeholder support, in particular, when the organization focus on various activities aiming at alleviating poverty in the host countries where stakeholders can be different from place to place. Cultural factors play pivotal roles in Laos and Thailand when it comes to stakeholders' expectations, management of relationships with various regulatory

and community stakeholders, and approaches in promoting CSR for poverty alleviation. It is recommended that MNCs fully understand socio-cultural approaches in conducting CSR activities in the host countries. Mining MNCs are in the complicated situation, due to their profit focus. The neo-classical view of MNCs may impede their ethical ground and accountability. Examples from Lao PDR show that dealing with issues such as inequity among people from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the operation of MNCs, or preparing local villagers to be self-reliance when MNCs withdraw their business in the future, requires a strong level of ethical accountability.

Similarly, MNCs in Thailand explained (we have no way of knowing what they understand other than from what they tell us) that informal institutions such as religious institutions, farmer groups or women association may expect some long-term contributions from MNCs in their villages. Expectations from stakeholders in the host countries are not uncommon. Having identified CSR issues as global and local in nature, MNCs in this study started from the identification of key issues in the host countries. As CSR requires long-term collaboration from various stakeholders, MNCs in both countries invested in financial and technical support to build relationships with key local stakeholders, such as local government, community and religious leaders as well as educational and training institutions. This study also confirms that most CSR strategies require time to establish and continue. To understand ways of working with the community in host countries, this study included people from Thai and Laotian communities reflecting upon their needs to the organizations.

This study contributes to understanding on relationship between MNC's approaches on poverty alleviation and influence from regulatory and community stakeholders. In fact, we can assume that there is a high degree of interdependence between MNC's competitive environment, policies and actions, as regulatory and community stakeholders can influence public opinion, demands and expectation. Also, they have power to channel valuable resources toward or away from MNCs. Data from MNCs in both sectors in Lao PDR and Thailand conform to a high number of issues from the poverty evaluation framework. Most MNCs appear only willing to state active commitment if others in their sector do so as well. It might be suggested that MNCs fear that, because of their involvement in poverty alleviation, they might lose out to others that do not have a strong policy (and/or that claim to be active but fail to enforce it). This argument seems to be supported by the exploratory analysis of different sectors.

This study also confirms significant roles of some social institutions that affect informal economy and the work of MNCs. Social groups such as the housewives, female farmers, influential families or religious groups in the community occur at least partially outside a governing body's observation, taxation, and regulation. Some of them control economic and political informal power in the local community. They also play significant roles in supporting, promoting or demoting the contributions from MNCs in both countries. Therefore, MNCs must understand what roles to play in different circumstances and cultural and managerial contexts.

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