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Framework to Analyze Borders from a Gender Perspective

Case Studies of Borders at the Lower Mekong Basin Countries

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This paper discusses what perspectives from borders can offer to gender and development studies through examining cases of borderlands at the Lower Mekong Basin countries in Southeast Asia. Borderlands are particular places where social norms and practices can be lenient and where state control can be different from centerlands. It is a place where the state implements particular control for national security reason, but at the same time, a place where people living at the border can utilize counter-hegemonic forces (Staudt 1998) against the state to protect and enhance their livelihoods. The paper utilized three key dimensions of borderlands (modified from the four dimensions identified by Segura and Zavella (2008)), namely, structural, discursive, and interactional/relational dimensions to analyze the three borderlands at the Lower Mekong Basin.

The structural dimension was discussed using the case of Thai-Cambodian border and Thai-Lao border. Thai-Cambodian case analyzed the cross-border fish trade from Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia to Thailand. When the borderland was a battlefield, small-scale fish trade by women flourished. However, when peace came and the state started to control the border by “opening” border trade, female small-scale fish traders were not able to compete with larger traders and were marginalized.

At the Lao-Thai border, Lao weavers started to receive sub-contracting work from Thai weavers when Thai weavers were not able to produce enough to meet demand. Such cash income improved the standing of Lao weavers in their households. However, when more and more Lao women started to weave, the market was flooded with hand-woven material. As the price dropped, so had the quality of the material. Poor weavers started to sell to traders instead of going to the market themselves, isolating themselves from exposure to the market and market information.

The discursive dimension was explored through the case study of Thai-Cambodian border and Thai-Burmese border. In the fish trade case at the Thai-Cambodian border, although female Cambodian small-scale traders are at a disadvantage, these fish traders used the linkages with Thai traders for business survival. They also used their discursive power to belittle the importance of the border in order to counter the state control that had marginalized them.

At the Myanmar-Thai border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, migrant workers from Myanmar worked

under bad conditions with low pay. However, the lenient control over migrant workers at the border area enabled migrants to invite their families from Myanmar to live with them in Mae Sot. This allowed for wider variety of employment patterns among workers, as well as wider options for childcare compared to the centerlands. By creating a discourse that Mae Sot is an “extension” of Myanmar, women were able to get better support from their families back home.

The interactional/relational dimensions are discussed through the cases of Thai-Cambodian border and Thai-Lao border. The case of female fish border traders at Thai-Cambodian border showed that the only way the Cambodian traders were able to survive the harsh competition in trade was through strengthening their linkages with Thai traders, even though the power relations with them were unequal.

The Lao weavers at the Thai-Lao border also had an unequal relationship with Thai weavers. With more and more Lao weavers joining the market, prices dropped and Lao weavers lost their direct access to the border market. Lao weavers had a weaker negotiation position vis-a-vis the Thai weavers, and the state started to exercise more control over the weavers at the border by imposing an export tax. However, some Lao weavers were able to circumvent such power relations with Thai traders and the state with the help of their husbands. They were able to access wider array of markets in Bangkok by relying on their husbands for transportation.

Studying borderlands and border people’s relationship with the state and market shows how productive activities and social/gender relations are shaped by the structural changes in state governance as well as market changes. This paper attempted to demonstrate how women at the borderlands perceived “border,” and how they have tried to overcome restrictions imposed on them through the border, and at the same time, how they tried to utilize the border for their own benefit. Women at the borderlands not only confront state control, but also challenge social norms by mobilizing discourse and economic power for their survival and freedom.