Rethinking 'gender inequality' and 'family' in Thailand: exploring the case of lone motherhood

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The Question/Problem

In the Thai context, lone mothers may be one of the most vulnerable groups in society, and a variety of indicators suggest that lone mothers are among 'the poorest of the poor'. As in other countries, how lone mothers are treated can be understood as an indication of the level of gender inequality. This paper raises key contextual issues that are specific to Thailand and asks how the status of lone mothers can be raised and gender equality be achieved in the context of these issues: The first is family structure, particularly the 'looseness' of marriage and divorce but also the maintenance of a presumption of male promiscuity and non-monogamy; Secondly, the labor market status of Thai women, who have traditionally participated. Thirdly, is the religious context; Some of these aspects of the context pose significant barriers for women to form and maintain autonomous households or the establishment of a 'women-friendly state', or 'women-friendly policies' which are key goals of western feminist approaches to social policy (see example in Orloff, 1993; Hernes, 1987). In turn these contextual differences challenge some of the assumptions of western feminist frameworks.

The Method

This paper draws on a qualitative study of 25 lone mothers and 7 key informants working with lone mothers in NGOs in Bangkok, Thailand. For the purpose of this research lone mothers were categorized into five groups; Unmarried pregnant women (women who pregnant without partners and have no other children), Never married mothers (women who have children before they are married and raise their children alone), Deserted mothers (women with children who have been deserted for at least 6 months), Divorced mothers (women with children who have divorced (registered) at least 6 months), and Widows with dependent children (women who have children under 20). The face to face in depth interviews aimed to explore perceptions and experiences of social stigma and social support and to provide a range of women's opportunities to provide suggestions about improving the position of lone mothers in Thailand. This paper focuses on the findings and policy implications that relate to the key issues mentioned above: the manifestations of stigma toward lone mothers in Thailand; the specificity of Thai marriage and family conditions, including the acceptance of 'unruly male sexuality'; the significance of the traditional female breadwinner role in Thailand; and the influence of the core religion, Buddhism, on family life including reproductive choice and gender roles and experiences.

The Findings

Social stigma played a significant role in the status of lone mother and the experiences of all lone mothers, however the most stigmatized conditions were associated with youth and unmarried pregnancy.

However, no matter how they became a lone mother; they were very likely to be regarded as responsible for their single status, such as having been a bad daughter, bad wife and/ or bad mother, despite the fact that in many cases the actual reasons for being a lone mother were associated with 'the man leaving' or 'the man having another woman'. Women also felt responsibility for their single status despite the fact that a large proportion of the participants had experienced physical or emotional violence toward them. In addition, it was found that Thai women can be regarded as Virginia Mapedzahama called 'economic mother'. Although women's economic independence tends to boost women's power in the family in western countries, Thai women were found in the different situations. It was found regardless of Thai women's roles as economic providers, they tended to have less power than men in household. Moreover, in many cases, the sharing of economic roles appeared to have somewhat exacerbated gender inequality and this was related to the double burdens of childbearing and wage-earning roles (Mapedzahama, 2009). What is worse, while Thai women have access to paid work and there is a strong cultural expectation those Thai women (especially mothers) will participate in the labor market, lone mothers tend to have a low quality of life because they have to take a full responsibility for the family with inadequate income and support (e.g. in the informal sectors). Moreover, whilst the religious issues have to be acknowledged, since there are different principles and practices between men and women, which could lead to gendered perceptions of 'sin', particularly in relation to abortion. In Thailand, the legalization of abortion has been proposed as the solution to gender inequality and related to women's 'body rights' (see example in Whittaker, 2002); however, in my study, abortion did not appear as a women's interest, particularly among Buddhist lone mothers who considered abortion as 'killing' and related to 'sin' (also see Whittaker, 2001, p.431).

Policy Implications

In exploring all types of lone mothers' experiences of social stigma and social support, a picture developed of the contours of gender relations in Thailand. In particular, it found that the concept of Foucault's power relation provides an avenue for understanding the situation of lone mothers and Thai women. While the status and living condition of women may be affected by family roles, sexual norms and religious beliefs, the most important element is 'self' accepting difficulties based on double standards in social norms including 'à¸à¸à¸—à¸™' (be patient/ tolerate) with; 'the man having another women', 'abusive', 'destiny', and 'sole responsibility for children' through the concept of 'Passivity' under the institutional normalization of the concept of 'Thai good woman'. While the women in this kind of situation they could not resist this dominance as dominance discourses in the society, the interviews gave them the opportunity to resist or tell the story through answering the question 'what would you like to see 'Change'. Two main themes around what lone mothers mentioned their 'changes' significantly indicate their needs to improve social attitude towards Thai women and social support. In terms of gender theory, this study also suggests to modify gender theory that the relations of family
and gender inequality need to be rethought beyond the western models.