Women's Empowerment through Exposure to Media Messages: A Case Study of the Thai-So Ethnic Group, Kusuman District, Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This research investigated the outcomes of women's empowerment through exposure to media messages by the Thai-So ethnic group. The purposive sampling technique was used for selecting 36 key informants, and the generational cohorts of key informants were based on the theory of generations. Semi-structured interview guidelines were applied as the research instrument. The findings reveal that exposure to media messages empowered these Thai-So women to share comments, participate, apply knowledge, and make decisions. Referring to the index of women's empowerment, the women were empowered to make decisions in agricultural production and to control the use of their income. Specifically, they shared comments about selecting chemical fertilizers and pesticides and participated in selling agricultural products. They also could freely spend the extra money they earned and participate in using their main income. Interestingly, it was found that Generation X-ers and Generation Y-ers were empowered to make decisions concerning the household, but baby boomers were not. As for decision-making power over productive resources, none of the three generations were able to have access to productive resources because patriarchal values still exist among the ethnic Thai-So.

Keywords: women's empowerment, media exposure, media messages, Thai-So, ethnic group, Kusuman district

Introduction

During the last five decades, Thailand has been committed to promoting gender equality and has continued to integrate it into all aspects of national development (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2018; Office of the National Economic and Social Development Plan, 2016). Nevertheless, women from some minority ethnic groups still face certain kinds of repression within their society and have been left out of the development agenda (Foundation for Women, 2017). The northeastern region of Thailand is the country's largest and most highly-populated region, with a multiplicity of ethnic groups of different origins, languages, and habits. The research of Thongyou and Phongsiri (2017) points out that the patrilineal inheritance system and patrilocal residence system continue to be predominant among the Thai-So, and that women of this ethnic group still face disparities in access to resources and social services. These findings are consistent with the present research, and thus the women in the Thai-So ethnic group are suitable to be a case study in this research.

As the literature review points out, many scholars have defined empowerment, which varies across disciplinary traditions, domains, and contexts. These definitions of empowerment mention issues of gaining power, decision making, control over one's life, and attaining the capacity to live the life one wishes to live. A large number of researchers have studied women's empowerment through various indexes of decision-making. In this research, the individual/household level indicators of empowerment and the Women's Empowerment Agricultural Index (WEAI) became the framework of the study (Alkire et al., 2013; Malhotra, 2003). However, the researcher adjusted and supplemented the indexes in order to be compatible with the context of the ethnic Thai-So in Kusuman district, Sakon Nakhon province. The indexes here are the following: 1) decision making in the household, 2) decision making in agricultural production, 3) control of the use of income, and 4) decision making power over productive resources.

In the 21st century, we have found ourselves living in a media-dominated environment where newspapers, radio, television, satellite television, and the Internet affect us on a daily basis (Kaithong and Yongvanit, 2016). Not surprisingly, mass media has become the crucial tool that can be used to manipulate people's opinion and attitudes, and thereby their behaviors, in a relatively short period of time (Devereux, 2007). The use and effect model resulted from the interaction of two paradigms-minimal effect and powerful effects. This model was explained through the concept of media use and outcomes of the mass communication process. That is, the outcomes were influenced partly by media content mediated by use and partly determined by use itself (Windahl, 1979).

Communication researchers realize that mass media, such as print, radio, television, and the Internet, have become important empowerment tools by providing a forum for the airing of women's issues. Previous research about women's empowerment found that mass media provides a platform for accessing information regarding business, health, family, and other issues of importance. Mass media has improved the awareness and knowledge of solutions to community challenges, and women's issues in particular (Mogambi and Ochola, 2015; Dahal, 2013). Similarly, Ting, Ao and Lin (2014) reported that women who were exposed to television, compared to those who were not, were more aware of their autonomy, had greater financial independence, avoided unwanted programs more effectively, had *stronger negative attitudes towards physical abuse, and had a lower birth rate. Moreover, in the information age, the use and reach of social media increased rapidly over a period of almost a decade. Social media became a significant tool for establishing women's empowerment. For example, in the southwestern Amazonia area of Brazil, social media provided opportunities for women to discuss politics and connected them to the outside world. Moreover, social media fostered participatory communication and assisted greatly in achieving the goals of the gender equality movement. It also generated an increase in women's news sources (Akpabio, 2012).

The above literature review shows that mass media have a causal effect on women's empowerment. Regarding gender studies research in Thailand, previous work concerning women and media emphasized the positive effect of media on women's images and their technological development. However, very few research projects have studied the empowerment of ethnic women via their exposure to media messages.

Research Objectives, Methodology, and Location

The objective of this research was to investigate the outcomes and discuss the reasons for Thai-So women's empowerment through their exposure to media messages. This qualitative research employed the case study method, which explores real-life, contemporary contexts or settings. Kusuman district in Sakon Nakhon province, an area where Thai-So people are found in significant numbers, and which is a historical site of the Thai-So ethnic group, was selected for the study. Three villages in this district were purposely selected, namely Photipaisan (in Photipaisan sub-district), Kokmoung (in Napho sub-district), and Nonghoynoi (in Kusuman sub-district), because the majority of their population are the ethnic Thai-So who use the So language for communicating within their communities and families (Figure 1). Importantly, cultural and traditional gender discrimination of Thai-So women still appears. According to official records, the population of Photipaisan village is 684, followed by 527 in Kokmoung village, and 471 in Nonghoynoi. The people's occupations are farming, labor, and government employment. The Thai-So women's educational backgrounds are rather varied. They include the baby boomer generation (1946-1964), who graduated from primary school, while some in Generation X (1965-1980) have had the opportunity to study in junior high school. Generation Y (1981-2000) includes those who graduated from secondary school and vocational school as well as those who earned a bachelor's degree.

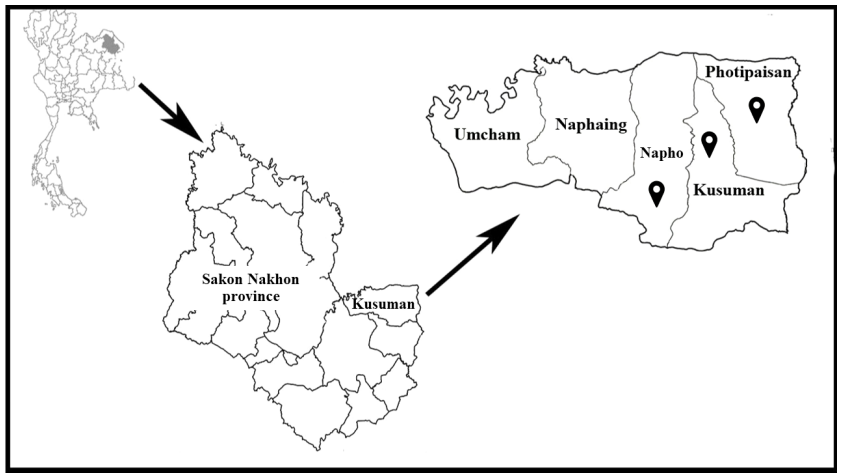


Figure 1 Map showing the targeted area: Kusuman district in Sakon Nakhon province; Photipaisan village (in Photipaisan sub-district), Kokmoung village (in Napho sub-district), and Nonghoynoi village (in Kusuman sub-district)

Key Informants

The purposive sampling technique was used to seek key informants (KIs) to meet the study's objective. The theory of generations is an important tool in dividing the generational cohorts of KIs. According to this theory, people who were born and lived during the same time will share similar experiences. Hence, the KIs were divided into three generations by using the criteria of Reeves and Oh (2007): the baby boom generation (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), and Generation Y (1981-2000). The KIs numbered approximately 36 persons who were divided into twelve equal groups. These KIs are Thai-So women who were born and grew up in the areas of study. In addition, they have been exposed to both traditional media (such as newspapers, television, radio) and non-traditional media (such as the Internet).

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation, with the support of the Kusuman district

chief and folk philosopher. The KIs were interviewed in person by the primary researcher and the research assistants, using a variety of questions. While the interviews were in process, the researcher observed the interviewees' facial expressions, tone of voice, environment, etc. Information obtained in this way was interpreted in order to understand the context of the Thai-So community and events regarding women's empowerment. Importantly, it helped reinforce the information received from the interviews. Data were collected during the period August 2018-December 2019. Follow-up research was carried out until 1 May 2020. Content analysis was also used for data analysis. All data were analyzed through a three-step process consisting of the following: (1) decontextualization (identifying and coding segments or units of meaning in the data), (2) subsequent recontextualization (categorizing and thematically assembling segments with other segments that deal with the same topic), and (3) synthesis.

Findings

This research was conducted under the conceptual framework of mass media and empowerment, as described in the previous section. The research findings were divided into two main parts, as described below.

Exposure to Media Messages of Thai-So Women

Exposure to media messages was the crucial driver leading to the empowerment of Thai-So women. Thus, this issue illuminates the role of media use, channels, and media messages, as follows.

1. Media use

The findings indicate that while media use of each generation overlapped among the three generations, there were several differences. First, baby boomers did not read newspapers or use the Internet. They listened to the radio and watched television because these media were not complicated and did not require any skill on the part of the audience. They spent time listening to the radio to a greater extent than using other mass media. It was also found that these women did not have their

own radios; these belonged to their husbands. As a result, they listened to the news along with their husbands. Second, the Generation X-ers watched television and listened to the radio. Interestingly, some of them began to use the Internet through their smart phones, which they were able to buy from the money they had earned as labor migrants. Labor migration was the significant driver allowing them to accept, learn, and access these media devices. Third, Generation Y-ers used the Internet to a greater extent than other media. In fact, they preferred to watch television, but it was often not convenient, as the majority of houses have one television while there are many family members. Also, individual preferences for TV programs would differ. As Molokini (2018) explained:

> If my mother is watching television, I cannot watch my favorite program because my house has one TV, and so I use my mobile phone (Molokini [Pseudonym], 2018).

2. Channels and media messages

As for the media channels to which informants were exposed, it was found that there were differences across the three generations. Firstly, baby boomers did not have a favorite station; they listened to every station. They stated that if there was a signal interference or poor audio quality, they would change to another station, such as station 909 of Sakon Nakhon, FM 103.25 Dhamma by Ta Bua, agricultural radio broadcasts, and other stations in the neighboring district. As for digital television, they watched channels 1, 33, 35, 3 and 30; all of the above channels that were the original channels of analog television-channel 5, channel 3, channel 7, TPBS and MCOT. Second, Generation X-ers listened to particular favorite stations, such as FM 95z Luk Tung Maha Nakhon, Napho Radio 88.25 MHZ, and the community radio broadcast of Thai-So people. Also, they began watching the new channels on digital television, such as Channels 23 (Workpoint), 27 (Chong 8), 31 (One), 25 (GMM 25) and 32 (Thai Rath), 34 (Amarin TV). They said that the new channels have various programs worth watching**.** Third, Generation Y-ers preferred to use social media via their smart phones

because it was portable and convenient for searching for news information. YouTube, Line TV, Facebook, Line, and Web browser were the most popular platforms.

Media messages were divided into three main types of programs: entertainment (i.e., Thai country music, Thai series, Indian series, Korean series, and game shows); documentaries (i.e., agriculture, health, Buddhist talks); and news and current affairs (i.e., breaking news, national news, analysis, weather forecast, government policy). When this data was analyzed, it was found that media exposure across the three generations differed in the following ways.

1) The majority of baby boomers were exposed to general media messages. Nonetheless, some of them preferred media messages about their way of life, such as Chomchon Thiaw Thai because they could learn more about their part-time work, such as weaving cotton.

2) Generation X-ers preferred news and current affairs programs, such as Tang Khon Tang Khid, Chuvit's News TV Show: Hitting Right in the Face, Tham Trong Kab Jomkwan. These programs enabled them to gain knowledge in many dimensions of social phenomena, such as introduction to law.

3) Generation Y-ers had the skills to search news information; as a result, they were exposed to media messages that they needed, such as agricultural techniques, introduction to law, applying for a job, etc. At the same time, they could share their experiences with others via Facebook, Line, and YouTube.

However, while entertainment programs remained the most popular, documentaries and news and currents affairs programs could lead to empowerment. As one informant explained:

> Actually, we like to watch drama because it is fun. But we also watch programs that provide knowledge, especially, news analysis programs (Kauai, [Pseudonym], 2019).

Exposure to Media Messages and Empowerment

The findings point out that the exposure to media messages empowered Thai-So women across the three generations. The details can be explained via the empowerment indexes as follows.

1. Decision making in the household

Regarding gender power relations, the husband has total power in decision making concerning the household. When a husband thought that his wife was on top of her duties, he would allow her to have decision-making power along with some other responsibilities. A wife could make decisions about issues like food preparation, dishwashing, laundry, cleaning the house, and the health care of family members. Household expenses were regarded as a fixed expense; the women could manage the electric bill, water bill, children's pocket money, and merit donations (10-20 baht).

The findings show that patriarchy still exists in Thai-So society, so it is not surprising that they firmly accept the old saying that "a man is like the front legs of an elephant while a woman is like its hind legs." Patriarchal ideology is reinforced through Thai soap operas, which still present gender inequality in the distribution of power, while the Thai female is depicted idealistically. Women in Thai mass media are presented through the norm of obedience and domestic ideology, i.e., specifying that the place for women is in the home, and that women always rely on and need the protection of men. Nevertheless, the Thai-So women, in particular Generations X and Y, have played increasingly significant roles in the household because of access to communication technology, i.e., smart phones and the Internet.

As seen in the division of labor in the household, childcare is the women's responsibility, but the children's education depends on the men. This situation results from limited access to education, because of the distance between the home and school as well as tuition fees. More than three decades ago, primary schools were not found in every village; as a result, the students had to travel to study in other villages. Thai-So women in Kokmoung village studied at Ban Bon Saharach Uthid School, 2.3 kilometers away. Moreover, there were no secondary schools in Kusuman district. Those who wanted to undertake further study at the secondary school level had to travel to the Muang district. The distance between Kusuman and Muang districts of Sakon Nakhon is

45 kilometers. In addition, those who wanted to further study after the end of compulsory education had to pay a tuition fee.

However, such limitations gradually ended. Additionally, Thai-So men had other responsibilities, such as raising cows and buffalos, checking on the paddy field, and organizing ordinations and wedding ceremonies. As a result, Thai-So women were in charge of the children's education. The findings show that the women not only joined in school activities, but also helped the children do their homework. The Internet played a significant role in discovering new information, and became the tool used in helping the children with their homework. The interviewees said that they checked their children's homework after dinner. If the children did not understand or could not find the answer to a question, the mother would help them by using the platform of a web browser on the smart phone. As Yaibangkaew (2019) explained:

> Sometimes I use the Internet to find information for the children's homework. I like to use it because it is convenient and modern (Yaibangkaew [Pseudonym], 2019).

Moreover, social media played a significant role in managing the household. The women recounted that they had become more quick witted; they could access news and information when checking for a variety of goods and prices online. They turned to shop online instead of at the market because there were a lot of promotions, such as sales offering 50-70 percent discounts, often worth more than 300 baht. Most of the goods they shopped for online were mother and childcare products, clothes, women's products (e.g., lotions), mobile phone accessories, detergent, soap, shampoo, etc. Such goods were purchased through Shopee, a popular online shopping platform. As for making payment, they were able to pay cash on delivery. Pairachsong (2018) explained:

> I can spend money when shopping online through Shopee. I just need to see the goods on the Shopee pages and if they are not too expensive, I might buy them. I don't have a credit card, so I pay on delivery (Pairachsong [Pseudonym], 2018).

The informants said that they also still use the Internet to find news and information relating to the household through a web browser. For example, after they learned that the Thai government had introduced child support grants to provide financial assistance to poor families with newborn children, they searched online for more information. Pairachsong's daughter is now connected to this policy. The women also use the Internet to find or confirm information that they think may be questionable. A good example is as follows. Nawanuch (2019) said that when her baby was sick, someone told her that her baby had a skin allergy, while someone else told her that it was chicken pox. As she was very worried about her baby, she searched the Internet for information relating to the baby's symptoms. After she found the information on Chicken pox which was similar to her baby's symptoms, she took her baby to see a doctor the next day.

2. Decision making in agricultural production

Thai-So people's main occupations are farming; as a result, the division of labor in the agricultural sector provided the framework for analyzing the empowerment of the Thai-So women. While both men and women have roles in the process of agricultural production, the men's roles and functions are more important and riskier than those of the women.

According to the context of areas of study, the people cultivated rice for subsistence consumption and sold the surplus. After the end of the in-season rice, they cultivated cash crops in order to supplement their household income. Data reveal that the agricultural areas of Photipaisan village are bordered by a reservoir. As a result, the Photipaisan villagers are able to cultivate rice the whole year round while the rest of the villagers cultivate only tobacco and chili, plants requiring little water. Hence, it is not surprising that they were exposed to media messages relating to agriculture, weather forecasts, and news. The exposure to such media messages resulted in increased knowledge, news information, and power for decision making in agricultural production, as described below.

1) Typically, spraying chemical fertilizer and pesticide was the men's responsibility. Not surprisingly, the men had greater knowledge about chemical fertilizers and pesticides than did the women. Nonetheless, it was found that Thai-So women participated in sharing and choosing the types of chemical fertilizer and pesticide along with their husbands. Such participation comes from the exposure to media messages. The interviewees stated that, in fact, they gained information about chemical fertilizers through various channels, including a fertilizer agent, mass media, and others. Interestingly, it was found that mass media played a significant role in production. For example, they received information about Top 1 Fertilizer from mass media regularly. When they saw such information frequently, they thought that this fertilizer was good and could increase agricultural production. Ultimately, they decided to share this information and use the fertilizer on their farm. They further said that the information on mass media information was more credible than that from the fertilizer agents. Moreover, this information provided knowledge leading to the development of agricultural productivity. Namna (2018) explained:

> We listened to 'How to use Chemical Fertilizers and Pesticides' via Napho Radio 88.25 MHz. The agricultural program was aired at 13.00-14.00, every day except holidays. On the program the guest, a fertilizer shop owner, explained and recommended fertilizers. Nowadays, the new generation is exposed to information through the Internet on YouTube. We thought that it was good and if we didn't understand, we could watch it repeatedly (Namna [Pseudonym], 2018).

2) The weather forecast was the program that they followed the most. The majority watched the weather forecast on the TV 360-degree program of channel 33. The weather forecast information was important for cultivation because it could help prevent damage to agriculture productivity caused by natural disasters. The interviewees

gave several examples, such as if there was a depression, they had to be aware that floods would affect agricultural productivity. If it was raining heavily, they had to go to the paddy fields to check the water. If the water levels rose too much and covered the rice plants or in fact covered almost all of the rice plants, then the plants would die.

3) Apart from the weather forecast, the interviewees followed the news about government policies. They explained that the government's news and information about agriculture was regarded as very important because it dealt with the aid that was available to them. Mungsan (2019) described the process of how she was accepted by her husband's family because she listened to radio programs such as Ratchenee and Kamphu of 35 FM MHz Luk Tung Maha Nakhon. During that time, the government under the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra launched a rice mortgage policy. After she listened to broadcasts about this policy, she thought that selling to a rice mill that joined a rice mortgage policy was better than selling to a mill in the village because of the price of rice. Hence, she convinced her husband to join this policy. Traditionally, selling rice depended on the decision of the senior family member and the husband. At first, both she and her husband disagreed about selling rice in the rice mill, because they were afraid that they were going to be deceived. However, she did not give up; she tried to find information in order to know what to believe. She asked the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) about this policy. After she felt confident, she tried again to convince her husband and senior family members. Ultimately, they joined the rice mortgage policy. This policy helped their household income to increase, and it became the reason that her husband and senior family members accepted her capability. Today, she still participates in selling rice. She explained:

> My husband's lineage accepted and trusted me because of the rice mortgage policy of the Thaksin government. My husband and his relatives did not join this policy at first. I listen to the news on the radio. I heard that the government would launch a mortgage policy via the BAAC. At that time, no one else had joined the new scheme because they were afraid of being deceived (Mungsan [Pseudonym], 2019).

3. Control of use of income

The findings indicate that the main income of Thai-So people comes from two areas: agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The agricultural sector income came from cash crops. The interviews indicate that there were differences in cash crops in the areas of the study. In Photipaisan village, off-season rice was the most important cash crop because it made a greater profit than in-season rice. Those who cultivated 30 rai would earn approximately 100,000 baht, which is considered a lot of money. Those who cultivated approximately five rai would earn about 35,000 baht. As for the rest of the villages, in Kokmoung village, tobacco was the cash crop cultivated; from about 1-2 rai, the income would be 25,000-35,000 baht. In Nonghoynoi, growing chili could increase the household income at the end of the rice harvest. If it was cultivated on about 1-3 rai, the income would be 25,000-50,000 baht. As for the non-agricultural sector's income, it came from weaving cotton cloth, as well as from elderly care allowances, and public health volunteers' salaries and remittances.

The above data illustrates that the income comes from various channels. It is not surprising that the agricultural sector has become a significant channel of income. Conventionally, the women's duty was to collect money, but, in reality, this money would be under the men's supervision when purchasing expensive household goods (i.e., refrigerators, motorcycles, building a house) and merchandise used in the agricultural sector (i.e., tractors, water pumps, agricultural equipment, fertilizer, pesticide and seeds) and loans (i.e., relatives or friends borrow money). However, at present, as a result of their exposure to media messages, Thai-So women play a significant role in the control of income use. Certainly, exposure to media messages could improve an individual's knowledge, leading to an increase of income. An increase

of income is regarded as the driver of empowerment because the findings show that Thai-So women participated, shared comments, and provided suggestions on using income with their husband. Interestingly, it was found that Generation Y has participated increasingly in decisions concerning the main income. Moreover, they could spend their income freely; income here was the extra money that they received from part-time jobs, such as weaving cotton cloth, cultivating vegetables, and raising animals. The details are explained below.

The majority of baby boomers were members of a group of female weavers in Kusuman district. Their cotton weaving would take place after the end of transplanting rice seedlings and rice harvests. The weaving took around two to three days per piece. The price was 100-140 baht per piece; their income average was 1,400-2,400 baht per sale. As for the fabric pattern, it was developed through the individual's abilities. They blended the pattern of the ethnic Thai-So with other local patterns. Moreover, they changed the sarong's appearance in order to change with the times. Certainly, the development of fabric patterns and clothing shapes resulted from the exposure to television programs relating to weaving cotton, such as Chomchon Thiaw Thai of channel 3. Pairachsong (2018) explained:

> The television program presented the fabric patterns of other ethnic groups – some of those in the northern region of our country. I thought that they were very beautiful, and not difficult. I used these patterns in my sarongs and shawls…I also adjusted the length of the clothing. Generally, the sarong's length was at the ankle, but, nowadays, I adjust the length, so that it is at the knee for a teenager and at the shin for a middle-aged person (Pairachsong [Pseudonym], 2018).

As for Generations X and Y, their part-time work is still farming. The interviewees said that they cultivated vegetables and raised animals to sell. Although they already had some agricultural knowledge, they continued to increase it. For instance, they were exposed to new

knowledge and techniques of planting cabbage, morning glories, kale, and bananas. They also raised fish, frogs, and turkeys. They brought such products to sell in their village and in neighboring villages. Some sent their products to be sold on vending stands and for use in small restaurants. They have an income of between 3,000-10,000 baht per year.

They further said that such knowledge was gained from their exposure to media messages. The majority of Generation X-ers were exposed to agricultural knowledge by watching television, while a few of them gained such knowledge through social media on YouTube. Lanai (2018) said that she gained knowledge and techniques for banana cultivation through television programs, such as the Mahaamnat Banna program of channel 3, Kaset Bantoeng program of channel 1, and others. After she was exposed to those programs, she gradually solved problems about banana cultivation, and at the present time her products make a profit. She explained:

> After cultivating bananas for a while, I faced problems in production. I changed the chemical fertilizer about two or three times, but the production was not good enough. During that time, I used to watch a Thai PBS television program regularly. On some days, the program talked about to how to plant bananas. After the end of the program, I began understanding that my problem was related to the soil because banana trees like airy soil (Lanai [Pseudonym], 2018).

As for Generation Y, they acquired knowledge, techniques, and new ideas through social media on various platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Line. Lehua (2019) said that she was the first person who raised turkeys in Kokmoung village. She got this idea from a Facebook group, and her customers were in this group as well. She decided to raise turkeys because of market demand. Also, she found that social media became the channel for sharing various kinds of experience, such as which animals could make a profit, how to take care of plants, which

fertilizers were the most suitable, etc. She and others were able to ask questions and get answers about various problems with their friends on Facebook page, Facebook Group, Line group and YouTube.

4. Decision-making power over productive resources

Access to productive resources was a crucial index in empowering women. Productive resources here include credit, land, and other property (i.e., a house, a car, a motorcycle, gold, etc.). The findings reveal that all three generations still practiced and accepted the Thai-So tradition that the men should take care of the property and productive resources. Consequently, the women did not have power over productive resources. For example, Kauai (2019) said that she and her husband would decide to build a house and buy land or a motorcycle after they earned money from labor migration. However, all property depended on her husband, not her. So, she could not access loan sources because all of the property was in the man's name. Particularly, the official documents-such as title deeds (both for the farm and the house) and the car registration-were in the man's name; he had authority in the area of the law.

At present, Thai-So women can access new information. Unfortunately, baby boomers and Generation X-ers have not had information about the possession of productive resources in practice because of patriarchal beliefs. Phosanlee (2018) said:

> The majority of Thai-So women became interested in news analysis programs like Tang Khon Tang Khid on channel 34, Tham Trong Kab Jomkwan on channel 32, and others. These programs would discuss current issues, such as marriage scams and forest encroachment. Sometimes the moderator invited lawyers and people specializing in that issue to join the program. I gained many kinds of knowledge including information about possessing productive resources. I had never used such knowledge because the men had the duty of taking care of the property in the family (Phosanlee [Pseudonym], 2018).

Moreover, the findings point out that Generation Y-ers could access the news information better than other generations. Also, the exposure to media messages influenced their opinions, attitudes, and behavior. For example, they brought turkeys to raise instead of chickens. Also, they discovered and analyzed how to find ways to make money apart from doing cultivation. They started to plow with middle-size tractors; the plowing price would usually be 250-300 baht per rai. Nonetheless, this generation had not thought of occupying land and other property because they had not received an inheritance, and some still placed importance on labor migration. Plad-In (2018) explained:

> I came back home because I had a baby. When the baby was three months old, I went back to work and I now work in Samutprakarn with my husband. The salary is 15,000 baht per month. Together we earn 30,000 baht per month, which is much more than in farming (Plad-In [Pseudonym], 2018).

In summary, the above findings point out that the exposure to media messages sent through outlets such as radio, television, and the Internet were the main factors leading to empowerment. Through exposure to media messages, Thai-So women dared to share comments, participate, and apply knowledge so that they played a significant role in the process of decision making in the household, agricultural production, and income. Nevertheless, in some cases, exposure to media messages did not enhance their empowerment. As examples, the baby boomers did not dare to make decisions in the household, and none of the three generations had the power over decision making in productive resources. The findings are summarized via the conceptual framework seen in Figure 2.

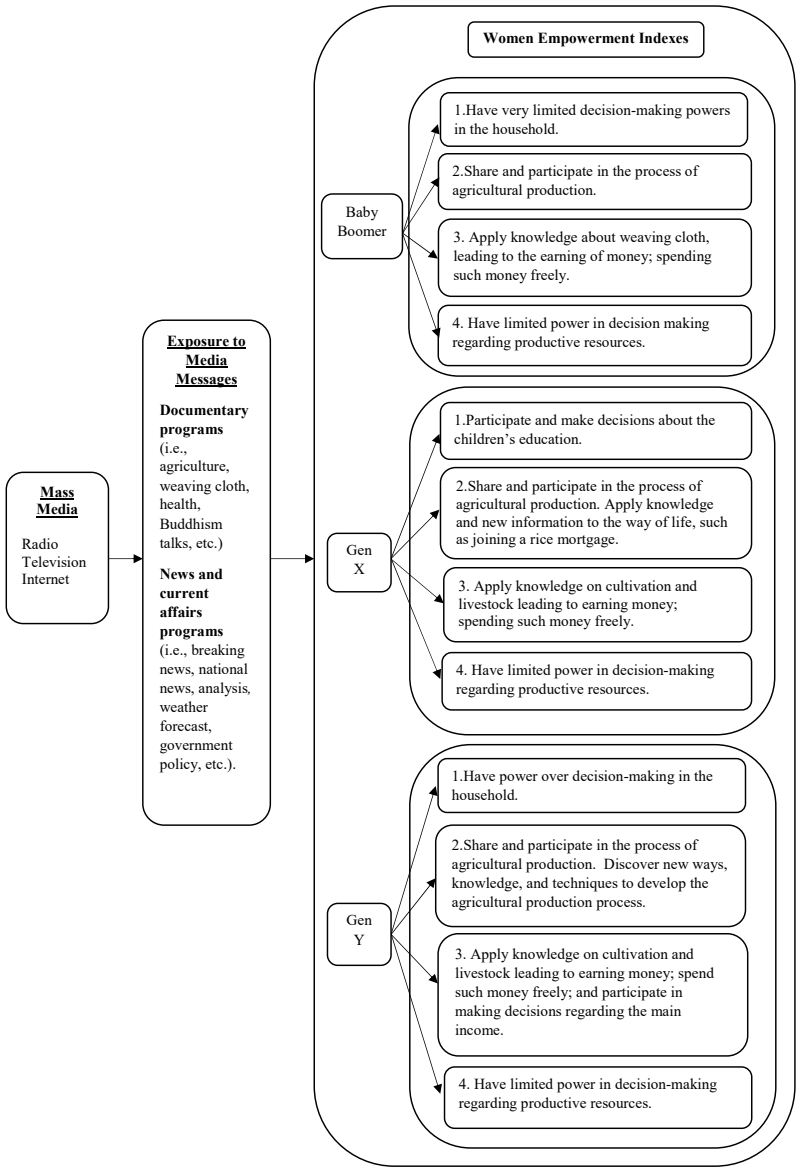


Figure 2 The Outcomes of Women's Empowerment through the Exposure to Media Messages of Thai-So women
Note: '1' is decision-making in household, '2' is decision-making in agricultural production, '3' is control of use of income, '4' is decision-making power over productive resources.

Discussion

The above findings will be discussed through two interesting issues as explained below.

Access to Mass Media

The study found that access to mass media had limitations that resulted from the hegemony of the government sector, family elders, and gender as described below.

First, the Subdistrict Administration Organization (SAO) had absolute power in manipulating access to the newspaper read by the Thai-So women. The SAO had the duty of providing a newspaper for the village, and consequently, the government employees selected a newspaper which was their favorite, not the choice of the Thai-So people.

Second, some Thai-So women could not watch their favorite television program because a family senior was watching another program. Hence, they did not really have access to the news and information that was consistent with their need.

Third, the majority of men were the owners of media devices, and therefore, the women were exposed to what the men were exposed to. In this way, access to mass media was hegemonized by gender-that is the male gender. For example, Thai-So women might like to listen to certain radio stations, but they could not change from the one that their husband was listening to.

The above information shows that such hegemonies were great barriers to the women's access to mass media. When the women could not access mass media, they were without access not only to entertainment, but also to news, information, and knowledge. Nevertheless, the findings point out that the Internet is becoming the most popular medium and the smart phone is the most important device for accessing the Internet when compared with other devices, such as desktop computers and tablets. In order to resolve the problems of such hegemonies, the following guidelines are proposed.

1) The local government should expand the Internet connections to cover as many areas of the villages as much as possible.

2) The local government should collaborate with mobile companies to help Thai-So people purchase cheap smartphones.

3) The local government should propose activities or projects about learning and developing the skills for using social media. Importantly, the teacher in such projects should be a descendant in the village.

Women's Empowerment through the Exposure to Media Messages

The research findings can be explained through the use and effect model. This model resulted from the interaction of minimal effects and powerful effects. In the context of the ethnic Thai-So, women were farmers; consequently, they were exposed to media messages that were consistent with their way of life. Namely, some needed to know how to cultivate new crops and how to raise animals. Some needed to know about certain agricultural techniques they could apply to their farms. Some needed to know the news about government programs supporting agriculture. Such findings accord with minimal effect, which was the first paradigm of the use and effect model. Minimal effect lies in the assumption that audience members actively seek out mass media or media messages to satisfy individual needs. Certainly, such exposure to media messages generated the acquisition of knowledge, leading to the development of the women's farms and accessing government aid. These outcomes indicate that the media messages exerted powerful, direct influence over Thai-So women. This phenomenon could explain the concept of media effect, which was the second paradigm of the use and effect model. That is, mass media is an important tool that could be used successfully to manipulate people's opinions and attitudes, and thereby their behavior.

According to media messages, entertainment programs were still viewed the most; nonetheless, some programs such as documentaries and news and current affairs led to empowerment. In this research, the indexes of women's empowerment, influenced by the studies of

Malhotra (2003) and Alkire et al. (2013), were adjusted and added to the information in order to be consistent with the context of the ethnic Thai-So in Kusuman district. When data were analyzed, it was revealed that the exposure to media messages had been the significant driver leading to the establishment of the empowerment of Thai-So women across three generations.

Unfortunately, in some cases, exposure to media messages did not empower Thai-So women. Baby boomers were not empowered in household decision making because they firmly believed that men were the breadwinners. As a result, the men had superior power in the household. Moreover, exposure to media messages did not affect empowerment in decision making regarding productive resources across all three generations. The main reason lay in the patriarchal ideas that remain in their way of life. Moreover, there is no empirical evidence to indicate that the women used the knowledge they gained to solve problems about productive resources. At present, they cannot access credit, land, or other kinds of property. It is interesting that Generation Y-ers could access news information better than the other two, and, thus access to productive resources should appear in this generation. However, it was found that they were not interested in buying land, building houses, buying cars or even loaning money because they were still content with participating in labor migration. Interestingly, they did not need to own land, a car, house, etc. because they still used the family productive resources. Although the exposure to media messages did not empower women in some cases, primarily it had an effect on the establishment of empowerment of Thai-So women. The details were mentioned via the empowerment index as follows.

1) Decision-making in the household: the Generation X-ers played a significant role in some household issues, such as taking care of their children's education. However, if the issues affected the household, the matter would depend on the husband's supervision. On the other hand, Generation Y-ers in the study did have absolute power in the household. That is, they could make decisions in areas like child support grants and taking a child to the doctor, without consulting their husband.

2) Decision making regarding agricultural production: all three generations have participated increasingly in the process of production. Interestingly, it was found that Generation X-ers played a role in the selling of agricultural products. This step is regarded as important because it involves negotiation and income. As for Generation Y-ers, men and women work side by side in every step of agricultural production. Moreover, they cooperate in finding new ways, knowledge, and techniques to develop the process of production.

3) Control of the use of income: through access to agricultural knowledge via mass media, women found that they could make money. Therefore, it is fair to say that the exposure to media messages was the first driver, and money was the second driver empowering them to participate in decision making using the main income.

Referring to the discussion in terms of the effect of the exposure to media messages on the establishment of empowerment, substantial messages could manipulate the audience's opinions, attitudes, and ultimately behavior. After Thai-So women's attitudes were affected by the exposure to media messages, they dared to participate in decision making and dared to share comments. Interestingly, it was found that there were differences in the power of decision making across the three generations. Namely, the baby boomers were empowered with decision making but most of the power still depended on the men. The Generation X-ers have more power in making decisions on some issues. The Generation Y-ers have power to decide along with the husband and for them the roles and functions of husband and wife are mutually supportive.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the exposure to media messages definitely empower Thai-So women. These findings are supported by empirical research, which shows that mass media exposure, having a direct effect, was taking the community agenda into the public sphere where it helped establish 'a voice for the voiceless' and hence was a platform for generating empowerment ideas. Also, the Internet on various platforms through smart phones became the crucial channel and space for empowering women in the information age (Mogambiand Ochola, 2015; Dahal, 2013; Wasi, 2017).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings indicate that radio, television, and the Internet on smart phones are the important devices for access to news and information. Documentaries, news, and current affairs are the programs leading to the empowerment of Thai-So women. Thus, the exposure to media messages via such programs has empowered them to share comments, participate, and apply knowledge, all of which contributed to decision making. However, exposure to media messages did not empower women in all cases. Baby boomers were not empowered to make decisions concerning the household and none of the three generations were empowered to make decisions regarding productive resources. In all cases, this lack of empowerment lies in the patriarchal mindset that still exists in Thai-So society.

As for suggestions, the findings show that Thai-So people have never been exposed to newspapers, but only to Internet usage through social media, which is likely to continue to be popular. In fact, the government is working to extend the Internet to rural areas under the village broadband Internet project, known as Net Pracharat. Unfortunately, the majority of villagers in the areas of study still do not have access to it. Therefore, it is recommended that instead of using the budget for newspapers, the Subdistrict Administration Organization (SAO) should use it to extend the Internet signal. When Thai-So women can access the Internet, government agencies can produce useful messages leading to the development of each target group. Therefore, research in the future should study the relationship between Internet usage and empowerment.

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