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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/12m6777v>

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Publication Date

2009-11-01



Bridging gaps and shaking hands with the Thai-Muslim world

UC STUDENTS FORM WOMEN'S INITIATIVE FOR LOCAL LIVELIHOODS TO EMPOWER SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

by Amy Ta, Christina Hughes, Christine Nguyen, Elizabeth Lam, and Terri Chan with a preface by Michael Silverman

Preface by Michael Silverman

Since the tsunami in December of 2004, I have been involved in gender and community-based participatory research in communities in Southern Thailand as part of my research agenda with the Institute of the Environment at UCLA. I quickly learned that women vis-à-vis men had particular acumen as advocates for sustainability: creating public health awareness campaigns, initiating trash collection and recycling services, and organizing and managing profit-making, sustainable, micro-credit funds. Two women's organizations in Suksamran District, in Ranong Province, in particular, were able to transform tragedy into triumph. Women there may not have as equal roles as men in community or economic affairs, yet there is considerable gender equity in making decisions about how resources are used in both the home and the community. Since the tsunami, two Muslim women groups have organized, managed, and facilitated the only two successful micro-credit funds in the District (equivalent to a county in California). Through my summer Travel Study Thailand program, UCLA students have had the opportunity to share in the women's daily activities, delivering meals to women living with HIV/AIDS, designing and selling naturally tie-dyed bags and personal accessories, vending baked goods at the local market, and participating in environmental restoration activities. During the 2009 summer program, one group of UCLA students engaged with these women for their capstone community research project on sustainable livelihoods. One result is their development of a new collaborative called Women's Initiatives for Local Livelihoods (W.I.L.L.). The students share highlights from their experience in this article. Please feel welcome to contact the students at locallivelihoods@gmail.com or me at silvermanmc@gmail.com for more information or to learn how to get involved in Summer 2010.

An important component of our academic program was participating in ordinary community activities with Buddhist and Muslim villages in Southern Thailand. We planted rice, restored wetlands, cooked meals, wove nipa palm roofs, and created batiks, for example. During the final week, as part of our own research, we lived with two Thai-Muslim women's groups in Kamphuan City, located in the Suksamran District of Ranong Province bordering the North Andaman Sea to the west, with Myanmar just to the north. Many of the coastal villages in this region are Muslim, in an otherwise largely Buddhist country. While faiths are different, the King and the Royal Family are loved and respected by all Thais. The Royal Family and Government, faith, and

international organizations, we learned, all have contributed to social and economic development in this region and played roles in the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami relief and recovery.

Early on December 26th, 2004, 90-foot tsunami waves crashed across the shorelines of this area, destroying homes and business, and taking away many family members, mostly men working the sea. Local industries like fishing, which had previously employed many local women in the cleaning and marketing sectors, were completely destroyed. To get back on their feet, the Thai-Muslim women we met with had formed and developed small, grassroots organizations to provide their community with social and economic support. During our ethnographic research, the women were open in revealing their attitudes, concerns, and relationships with the natural environment, society, economy, and religion. For example, the women deeply weave religion into their lives. They explained how Islam cushions sudden misfortunes and motivates them to pursue various goals. Islam, they also elaborated,



teaches reciprocity, which is one reason why their 'Tie-dye Group' funds scholarships for disadvantaged youth and donates to support people, mostly women, living with HIV/AIDS. On the environmental side, though Kamphuan is rural and relatively unpolluted, the women expressed concern over their respective household's environmental impact. They have embarked upon creating sustainable

resource use by recycling and reusing local materials, properly disposing of solid wastes, and assisting other organizations' mangrove forest restoration projects. They undertook these efforts in spite of initial criticisms from community members, mostly men leaders, who said the women were too ambitious.

While making progress on social, environmental and economic issues, many

women stated they did not feel powerful enough, compared to men, to induce systemic changes within their community. One of their keys to creating change has been the success and sustainability of their micro-business activities, which ensures supplementary household income, and often provides economic clout to transform their role in the community from wage laborers or housewives to significant financial contributors to public health and educational initiatives. For example, they now have sufficient money to keep their children in school beyond the primary grades, and significantly, keep their girl-children in school to get an education they need to improve their opportunities. While the Royal Thai Government and the King's family support some economic and educational programs, and international organizations such as USAID funded credit programs immediately after the tsunami, these resources have little long term impact to change the community's dynamic of relying on natural resource extraction for economic well-being: an economic system that favors men's roles over women's. Many of the women we worked with feel that they need



KAMPHUAN WOMEN'S MICRO-CREDIT GROUP

additional education and work opportunities in more established fields like clothing design, restaurant management, and local government administration.

Inspired by these women's optimism, entrepreneurship, and persistence, our research team (Amy, Christina, Christine, Liz, and Terri) has formed the Women's Initiative

for Local Livelihoods (W.I.L.L.). We aim to do the following: (1) Spread knowledge about the women of Kamphuan's resilience and resourcefulness in sustaining their communities through social and environmental challenges like HIV/AIDS and tsunamis and typhoons; (2) Connect their micro-business of artisan and handmade clothing, batiks, and accessories with

customers from beyond Thailand's borders, starting with the UCLA community. This extends their market-reach, which they said was one of their primary concerns.

W.I.L.L. is fundamentally about willpower—a capacity held by all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, history, age, or gender, which can be strengthened by community and institutional support. Development requires not only collaboration, but also care and personal connection among all those involved: government institutions, the international community, the marketplace, and most importantly, local communities themselves. Ultimately, W.I.L.L. is not only a network for selling and distributing unique handicrafts, but moreover, an awareness-raising project that will strengthen community-based women's participatory development. W.I.L.L. plans to offer the Kamphuan women's customized products to UCLA through Net Impact Undergrad, a student organization that supports social entrepreneurship. All proceeds go directly to these artisans. For more information contact us at "Women's Initiative"(locallivelihoods@gmail.com).



KAMPHUAN TIE-DYE GROUP DIALOG

Michael Silverman, PhD received the 2006-2008 Postdoctoral Fellowship in Gender and the Environment, a fellowship created by the Institute of the Environment and in collaboration with the Women's Studies Program and the Center for the Study of Women. Silverman taught a course on "Gender and Sustainability" through Women's Studies and a public lecture, "Gender Matters: An Analysis of Disaster Relief and Re-development in Tsunami Affected Communities, Thailand," under the auspices of CSW. Silverman was also featured in November 2006 issue of CSW Update.

Amy Ta is an International Development and Communication Studies double major at UCLA. She reports for Daily Bruin Radio, organizes trail runs for Bruin Runners, and interns at the Burkle Center. Beyond campus, she has volunteered in New Zealand and studied in the Czech Republic. She plans to attend graduate school outside of California and eventually work with the U.S. State Department, a multilateral organization, or NGO to promote global diplomacy and capacity-building programs.

Christina Hughes is a Sociology major at UCLA. She aims to broaden her worldview and establish connections with other eco-

mind citizens through her experiences in East Africa and Southeast Asia. In her travels abroad, she has pursued social research focused on community empowerment and participatory development.

Christine Nguyen recently graduated from UCLA with a BS in Environmental Science with a Environmental Health Science concentration. She plans to apply the experiences and knowledge she gained through travel and study to her professional career and eventually attend graduate school.

Elizabeth Lam is an Environmental Policy and Analysis Planning major at UC Davis. She plans to pursue a career in Public Health, potentially with the California State Department. She hopes to gain more worldly experience through study abroad, as well as to attend graduate school.

Terri Chan is an Environmental Science major and Geography/Environmental Studies minor at UCLA. As the Community Impact Director for Net Impact Undergrad, she liaises with green organizations to promote socially responsible initiatives. She hopes to combine her love of travel and sustainability in her future career endeavors.



CSW's birthday party will feature renowned historian

Joan Scott

music and cake to follow

MONDAY, February 22, 2010
4 pm, Sequoia Room, UCLA Faculty Center

RSVP by Jan 15 to Patricija Petrac
ppetrac@women.ucla.edu/310 825 0590