



**SEATIDE**  
**Integration in Southeast Asia:**  
**Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion**

**WP3 Deliverable 3.4: Online paper 2: Gender**

**Gender at work in Southeast Asia:**  
**Norms, expectations and local manipulations**

## ***Gender at work in Southeast Asia: Norms, expectations and local manipulations***

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### **Introduction**

Research carried out by some of the contributors to WP3 addresses more or less directly the issue of gender in Southeast Asia and utilizes gender as a perspective to engage with issues of work and social and political mobility. In doing so, we acknowledge both dominant and marginal constructions and conceptions of gender and gender roles and explore the meanings attached to such ideas and notions at a local level. The work of WP3 indeed challenges the idea that local gender identity constructions are being swept away on the tide of globalization. Rather, we are aware that such constructions are reworked, rethought and that while some are reiterated others are creatively manipulated to comply with change and new expectations. Such work of WP3 highlights the ways local cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity are always framed against the history and contemporary socio-economic realities of the specific country at a specific time with specific results and outcomes.

Our research criss-crosses gender at various levels and in numerous regional contexts of Southeast Asia. Most questions about gender, gender roles and relations arise from research about work, and the world of the formal and informal economy remains the major focus of our individual projects. Here we ask in particular how gender roles and social expectations about gender change in the context of work precarity, what the impact of traditional and normative gender roles is on the current generation of youths who are trying to access the world of work and are trying to make a living, and how gender relations are being manipulated in marginal work surroundings, to what extent and with what political implication. Post-colonial feminist theories effectively destabilize 'gender' as a central analytical category and explore multidimensional subjectivities, emphasizing how gender is constituted through other kinds of social differences and axes of power. According to Butler (1994, p.33) gender is structured through norms and institutions, but it is also reconfigured through individual agency and symbolized both at a personal and collective level. It is here assumed that in the majority of the development plans both at national and international levels that include gender as an analytical category, the term has lost its critical and politicized edge, having been institutionalized into a series of tools and techniques that are far removed from the transformatory potential of gender as a feminist concept (Kabeer, 2005; Molyneux and Razavi, 2005; Leach, 2007). Therefore, we intend to underline the importance of a bottom-up perspective that understands gender dynamics as the result of a process of negotiation between normativity and personal agency, that eventually results in a transformation of existing normative categories.

With reference to two Indonesian cases that focus on the access to work and the work experiences of young males and with the help of qualitative work about women in Vietnam and Thailand we sketch out some of the questions that animate our research and perhaps the discussion about gender in Southeast Asia more in general. While it would be too simplistic and perhaps too ambitious to generalize the content of our observations, we consider our insights relevant in the study of the construction of contemporary gendered subjectivities and in the understanding of work.

## Norms, values and expectations

A great focus of our research concerns the role of what are generally understood as traditional gender norms, values and the social expectation that ensue. In the ethnographic research conducted by Matteo Alcano and Giacomo Tabacco, respectively working on the quest for a job on the informal market by the young construction workers of the region of Surabaya (East Java) and on the work experience of young males in the in the goldmines of the Aceh Jaya district of Aceh province, the question of normative gender roles and their relation with work seems crucial.

In Indonesia in general the idea of gendered individuals with prerogatives, duties and expectations is still quite productive and our informants make extensive reference to it when talking about their life.

As highlighted among others by Blackwood (2010), the ideological discourse on gender in Indonesia was and is represented linguistically as a sex/gender system, through the overlapping of sexed bodies and gender social attributes: gender is part of the “nature” (*kodrat*) of sexed bodies:

One way in which this is evidenced can be found in the Indonesian words for “man” and “woman”, which are the same words for “male” and “female”. *Perempuan* means both female and woman, *laki-laki* means both male and man; *kelaki-lakian*, for example, which has the root laki, is defined as manliness, mannish. In using these terms, Indonesians express a concordant relationship between bodies and behaviors. When people speak of *kodrat perempuan* or *kodrat laki-laki*, they are referring to the nature or character (*kodrat*) of women and men. (...) This relationship means that in the dominant Indonesian sex/gender system, one's gender attributes are seen as naturally and indivisibly part of one's sex (Blackwood 2010: 40).

Under Suharto's New Order, the State defined mother and wife as the primary role and duty of women:

The New Indonesian woman became a wife (*isteri*), who was defined primarily in terms of her commitment to follow her husband's lead and limit her reproduction capacity to the ideal older son – younger daughter. State pronouncements articulated a vision of women's nature (*kodrat*) that emphasized women's maternal role and responsibility for their children's health, care and education.

It was in the “nature” of women to be reproducers and a source of domestic labor. The discourse on gender operated through an extensive network of policies, programs and institutions that encouraged and enforced normative gender meanings (Blackwood 2010: 43), most notably through school education and text books. Since then, new female roles and ideas of femininity have emerged in Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as we will show below.

According to Blackwood (2010), such state driven discourses about gender roles in Indonesian society have historically worked together with religious (Islamic) views about proper conduct for women and men. This is relevant in a context where the majority of our informants are Muslims, with varying degree of reflexivity and participation. Islamic writers, Blackwood maintains, are generally concordant with the idea that women and men are different by nature: they have their own character, determined by Allah, as well as different dispositions and different social and cultural obligations (Blackwood 2010: 45).

Accordingly, dominant state and religious discourses about masculinity have been centered on the idea that men, and fathers, are economic providers for the family. The elevated Javanese discourse of masculinity centered on the idea of the *bapak*, the “father”, played a significant part in the construction of a hegemonic notion of national masculine identity during the New Order period. In a striking example, Suharto made himself known as *Bapak Pembangunan*, the “father of development” (Nilan 2009: 332). In principle, *bapak* rules over the family, but also over the business, the town, and by extension the nation state. He is entitled to exercise dominance because of his God-given wisdom, self-control and mastery of emotions. These qualities grant him authority over women, children and male underlings. He achieves hegemony through the exercising of “refined power embodying emotional self-restraint (Brenner 1995: 118). His calm demeanor demonstrates the triumph of *akal*, reason and control (Peletz 1995: 88-91) over base passions, *nafsu*.

Among the young men who are the subject of the research of Alcano and Tabacco, successful masculine identities seem to relate closely to the ability to provide for the family, and to fulfill the quite onerous (in terms of time and resources) community expectations. In particular, there is a perception that the transition to masculine adulthood is complete only when (young) men are able to draw together the considerable financial and cultural resources required to marry a woman from the community and to provide well for their wife, family and extended kinship network and, in the case of first-born sons, to care for their parents.

At a more tangible level, in both the contexts studied by Alcano and Tabacco gender, as informed by Islam and local social practices, determines the spaces people occupy. For instance, in Surabaya the local food stalls are the places where men gather to exchange information about work and work opportunities. While it is not completely unusual for women to attend these places at night, or to cook in the back areas, it is usually men who occupy the local *warung* to come together and pass around what they consider precious information about day-job opportunities and who engage in small exchanges of goods and food. In the villages of inner Surabaya, the woman's realm is that of the home and its related activities, although these sometimes include small business activities, in line with a Javanese tradition of women who work in and around the household. Similarly, Tabacco observes that the coffee shops are limited to men and that women are forbidden from accessing the goldmines and most gemstones and logging areas. In his case in particular, this is due to their presumed impurity and the misfortune they carry and that might undermine a man's skill at work. While gendered spaces prevent some from entering determined areas, they also define the access to work and reiterate the gendered individual's prerogatives and possibilities. We shall return to this last point later on.

What Alcano and Tabacco have noticed in different contexts of Indonesia is the social relevance of group of males who interact with each other and self-assemble in bands of companions, with different purposes. This underlines the importance of male sociality. In Surabaya, what men traditionally call *berkumpul* indicates a male institution, literally a form of aggregation and socialization that is finalized at exchanging information and spending time together. While men hang out, share a drink and gamble, they also exchange goods, make money and pass around information about job opportunities. This is in line with our previous point about the gendered qualification of spaces. Furthermore, Alcano and Tabacco observed how these spaces are also loosely used by men to experiment with intimate relationships with women outside or before marriage, and definitely outside the law or the social norm. This aspect of unregulated encounters is worth of mention in a context that is highly regulated by norms about sexual conduct and pornography, as expressed in the recent legislative dispositions about pornography and displays of

affection in public places. Such encounters defy the rules that regulate the social expectations about gendered behavior and while providing an outlet for experimentation they are also a vivid reminder of a man's duties and responsibilities.

Indeed what appears to be a common cultural horizon among the young men studied by both Alcano and Tabacco is the importance attached to marriage and married life. While marriages are often delayed and youths enjoy a certain degree of flexibility when it comes to engagement and putting together a wedding, the idea of marriage remains a powerful social device that regulates social identities and a cognitive tool for those who seek to enter adult life. As Vignato (2007) puts it, cognitive tools are “joints that facilitate life” and allow social actors to think and act upon social change, ponder the incongruities and potentials of life choices and orient actions. This is not to say that our informants do not experience contradictions; well on the contrary some are explicit about their need to negotiate between a different (perhaps more Western-oriented) lifestyle and well-established social values. We do not take these contradictions as a limit of our research but embrace them as fruitful viewpoints to study growth, life phases and transitions and to look at how social actors act upon them. In the case of the youths examined by Alcano and Tabacco in Surabaya and the Aceh region, we also look at leisure and the quest for pleasure and their intimately contradictory character to assess how social identities are constructed collectively among groups of peers. In other words, we insist on the youths' quest for a job and projectuality and we situate these experiences in line with a certain local tradition, but do not forget that at times youths do what they do best, which is to act their age in the eyes of their peers.

## **Gender roles and fluid work**

There is with no doubt a link between the social expectations about gender and the types of work men and women do. That there is a division in work duties and possibilities for men and women might seem a quite common observation. However, we are particularly interested in what the work places and the areas that men occupy say about the subjects themselves. Tabacco's research, for instance, shows that the quest for natural resources, such as gold, logs and gemstones in the forested mountains is restricted to men. In this work environment men and women are hardly interchangeable, unlike one might argue about work in agriculture, civil service or retail for example. In the mountains, men look for “that particular” gold that will help them change their life, symbolically and materially. Those who pay for labor and supply capital act out as fathers and elder brothers: they coach their workers, motivate them and instruct them on the job at hand. They are a constant reminder of duties and responsibilities. All this concurs to reinforce a local discourse about masculinity and the features of a full-fledged masculine identity in terms of duties and perspectives. Having said that, the adventurous and lucrative work spaces of the mountains say a lot about the need to elude the control of the community of origin and seek excitement and partial independence. While away for work, many decide to stretch out the time period before they will come back and get married and instead find the companionship of other women; some others end up spending some of the money earned to go out and have fun, just to cite a few examples and return to our point about the fractures of social expectations and collective behavior.

Overall, the time spent away seems to reinforce a sense of belonging. This is shown by both Alcano and Tabacco's research. The young construction workers who leave home for a short period time and rotate between the numerous construction sites of the new peripheral areas of Surabaya, and the young gold-miners of Aceh represent unskilled labor who is looking for material wealth under new economic conditions where work is precarious and fluid and uncertainty and flexibility are a part of the individual's horizon of meaning. Nevertheless what seems to emerge from our research

(for now) is the incredible sense of rootedness and vitality that our informants show as they re-conceptualize their time away from home as a time of potential to develop and experiment at the same time. For sure the experience of migration related to work, especially cross-border migration, discloses many more variables than it did, for example, for the previous generation of men in Indonesia. Nevertheless we find that such state of uncertainty does not altogether undermine the process of constructing a masculine identity through work. Quite on the contrary, for our informants uncertainty holds some sense of excitement, the excitement to look towards a common destiny and to challenge or defy a diffused condition of marginality.

## **Gendered subjectivities at work: redefinitions and potentiality**

So far our discussion has focused on the importance of the social values and expectations about gendered roles and how these are achieved through work for the most part. We have also shown how young men “use” work and their time away from home for work (especially a new kind of more precarious fluid work) to revisit their gender roles and try to balance social expectations with desire, personal excitement and pleasure. This is quite common among young men growing up, the need to experience contradictions and live well with them, more or less consciously.

While Alcano and Tabacco explore in great detail the world of young men, Alessandra Chiricosta's contribution shifts the focus onto the world of female workers in Vietnam and on the impact of the economic reforms initiated in 1986 on the lives of female workers (and workers in general of course).

Over the last few decades, Vietnam has made striking progress in reducing gender disparities. Vietnam also has one of the highest economic participation rates in the world: 85 percent of men and 78 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 60 participated in the labour force (Vietnam Development Report 2013). However, the impact of *doi moi* on the female role is still a problematic issue. Since the early 1990s, academics, government researchers and non-governmental organizations have debated whether the changes brought by the renewal have improved women's social, political and economic status or not. Even though all the population benefits from economic growth, according to Werner and Bélanger (2002: 16) the “notion of femininity has tended to revert back to pre-socialist norms, particularly among younger urban generations influenced by the lifestyle of Western consumer culture [...] there is a new balance between the public and private spheres, with the latter seen as reasserting its moral and patriarchal authority”. Since the economic reforms, especially in recent years, the increasing numbers and cases of labour conflicts and strikes in the foreign invested companies and local private ones have frequently been reported in public, reflecting the worsening labour conditions in the market economy as well as the growing public concern for this emerging social problem. Moreover, the reported labour conflicts often occurred in the factories of labour-intensive manufacturing, where the majority of workers are women.

The Vietnamese case clearly shows that even if women are directly involved in economic growth process, the female role inside the family, as well as in the work places, is supposed to be subordinate to man's. Although female education and participation in economic and social development is highly supported, nevertheless “unwritten laws” suggest that a lower profile should be adopted by women, in order to preserve family and social harmony. However, in Vietnam patriarchy – ascribed to the influence of the Confucian ethic – is not the only criterion that organizes familiar and social structures. On the contrary, Vietnamese scholars often remembers how Vietnamese cultural root are rather to be seen as matrifocal. The kinship system

in traditional Vietnamese societies was – and to some extent still is – bilateral. Therefore, any overlapping of the concept of “patriarchism” with “traditional gender role” should not be taken for granted.

From a cultural perspective, modern Vietnamese women are supposed not to compete with men in “their fields” and to fulfill the domestic duties even if they have a job outside. Even if women are recognized as the backbone of the Vietnamese rapid development, they should maintain a “lower position” not to lose their “femininity”. As several feminist scholars point out, Governmental priority on development is showing a frightening lack of attention to gender empowerment from a cultural perspective. Quoting Werner (2002) “The *doi moi* process is not driven by a neutral market, but is socially embedded and is characterized by unequal gender relations. In the literature on South East Asian industrialization and women, Ong (1987) underlines how the misinterpretation of the meaning of women’s positions within cultures, or notions such as ‘traditional’ gender role and ideologies is functional to the exploitation of female labour. “There are convergences between capitalist and non-capitalist, local and foreign patriarchies and between globality and locality.” Such a configuration of the global and local context raises the question of women workers’ daily experience, and this relates to their resistance strategies and their capability of re-configuring existing “gender norms”. While the *doi moi* programs formally declare their intent to protect women’s interests and promote women’s participation, in reality *doi moi* contains several areas of gender bias, which is located in the redefinition of the boundaries of the ‘public’ and ‘private’, production and reproduction, “maleness” and “femininity”. These biases are currently undermining the position of women in general. However, it is also fundamental to understand to which extent and how women's capability of agency and resilience is working in a completely different direction.

Rapid industrialization and urbanization in Viet Nam over the past two decades have resulted in increasing flows of migrants from rural to peri-urban areas (where Industrial Parks are growing) for work purposes. In the past, labour migration from Viet Nam was dominated by men. However, the number of migrant women has increased steadily over the last decade. Even in important factories, migrants are often employed with temporary contracts, that obstacle their access to basic welfare services that are based on the residential system (*hộ khẩu*). Using a gender standpoint, it can be said that women suffer the burden of this uncertainty more than men because of cultural and social reasons, among which we should mention the importance given to marriage and having children. Interviews collected in the Thang Long industrial park (Noi Bai – Ha Noi) during a survey in December 2013<sup>1</sup>, aimed to explore how the concept and practices “femininity” are reshaped in the new conditions offered by the “no-men's -land” environment of hamlets and dormitories, if and how a self-narration as “woman workers” is taking the place of “peasant woman” narrative.

During the interviews, no case of gender based discrimination in the working place was reported. However, a certain degree of acceptance by worker of a gender based division of work was noticed, in which the connection between workers’ gender and their jobs mirrors the “commonsense” view that men and women hold different sorts of jobs because of differing physical capacities and psychological orientations. The fact that in the Industrial Park the majority of workers in the electronic sector are women, due to their “nimble fingers”, is accepted as a decision of the company that does not need any further explanations. To this extent, the case of

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1. The survey was a part of the SWORR and SEATIDE project, directed by Dr. Michela Cerimele, who designed an original theoretical framework for the analysis of issues related to migrations of industrial workers and their living conditions.

Thang Long Park moves in the same direction of “feminization” of work that has been observed worldwide, in which criteria that decide which works are “for men” and which are “for women” are organized at a higher level, and just accepted by workers. “Skill” is a gendered concept and men’s work and women’s work are socially constructed on this basis. Therefore, the decision of the companies to employ women in this sector that is marked by a deep assumption of gender stereotypes, lead to a reduction of the perception of gender based inequalities by the workers. That does not mean that a gender equality has been achieved. On the opposite, before Vietnam entrance in the new market economy, the idea of a gender based division of labour was fiercely challenged by the Party and by the Vietnamese Women's Union. Moreover, Vietnam Therefore, it can be said that the new neo liberal industrialization is introducing dynamics of potential gender based inequality.

The Thang Long Industrial Park, its dormitories and hamlets can be described as places of transit, rather than a place of arrival of migrations. Workers are aware of their conditions of precariousness: people interviewed neither like their work they do nor the place they live in (dormitories or hamlet) and just few of them (who live in the dormitories) maintained they would like to continue to work in the same industrial park. According to their words, the only reason that moves them is the higher income they can get there, which they use to survive and to help their families in the countryside. The majority of people interviewed (both women and men) depicted Ha Noi as a place that is impossible to access, as a “clam”. Too expensive, too noisy, too crowded. Therefore, their life-project does not involve any idea of settling in town, at least not in the Capital. The “nostalgia for the countryside” dominates their discourses, narrations and self-narrations, notwithstanding the fact that an improvement of their life conditions, that also endorses escaping from rural areas, was among the reasons that lead them to migrate. When asked what they intend – or dream – to do after leaving the Industrial Park, the majority of workers answered that their intention is to go back to the countryside. Some of them have no idea of what to do after this job. They hope that in the meanwhile, the development process will positively affect their birthplace, eventually letting them finding another job there. But they also know that now this is just a dream. Generally, they consider their present job as an occasion to acquire new experiences and skills, but just in vague terms. Most of the workers interviewed are young girls sent by their parents in order to support the family. Some of them overtly complain about their “destiny” to be the family breadwinner. But in the same time, they show a certain degree of pride for this role. Migration can increase these daughters’ status in the family because of the gifts they bring home or their higher contribution to the household economies. All these strategies affirmed their gender identity, or strong identification as daughters and women in their relationship with their parents, relatives, friends and communities. Some other girls told us the decision to migrate was theirs, but determined by the same reason to find a working place with a good salary. Only few people among the interviewed described their present job as an opportunity to do something else, or to realize a long term project. It can be argued that the lack of a “life-project” is related to the awareness of the precariousness of their working conditions. When asked what they would have done if offered a more stable contract, most of the interviewed answered they would have accepted. It has to be noted that only apparently this answer contradicts the previous one. A “stable contract” implies the possibility of planning a life project for many reasons, among which “salary” per se is not the most important. More precisely, a stable contract would allow workers to apply for a change of residence, according to the norms of the *hộ khẩu* system. In Vietnam, residence also means the possibility to have access to services such as kindergarden, free condoms and sexual educations (services that are delivered by the Vietnamese Women's Union), free vaccination for adults and children, free health care, etc. that not only increase the real value of the salary, but also make it possible to set up a family or live on one's own. Moreover, Mass Organizations such as the

Vietnamese Women's Union are organized according to the *hộ khẩu* system, so VWU representatives are absent in official dormitories and are not effective in involving migrant workers in hamlets. The sense of precariousness also negatively affects the possibility for female workers coming from rural areas to develop a fully aware sense of “woman worker” identity, as single persons and as a group. Therefore, their self - narration often goes back to the countryside, as a meaningful place, a place in which their identity was clearly defined also thanks to strong relationships they have built there. It has to be noticed that the Vietnamese sense of “identity” is fundamentally relational (in Vietnamese there isn't any word to translate the meaning of “identity” as an atomistic reality, out of a network of relationships). However, most of the workers are also aware of substantial changing that their experience as workers has operated in their life, in terms of self-narrations, expectations and perspectives of their “role”.

An interesting phenomenon ideally bridges the spatial gap between the countryside and the peri-urban space, i.e. the role of “grandmothers” coming from the countryside not only in supporting new couples in look after children, but in building a network of mutual assistance and solidarity in the hamlet. Following the Vietnamese traditions, during the first year of the baby, grandmother (from the mother's or father's side) spends with the couple a period of time (generally one year, or until the mother stop breastfeeding) with the new couple, to help them. What makes this practice particular here is that grandmothers coming from diverse provinces of North Vietnam are not limiting themselves to live inside the house of their son or son-in-law, as traditionally happens, following the familial rules. They are not just entering for a limited period of time the familial network of relationship of their offspring. They are creating their own network from the beginning. The new family is not properly settled in the hamlet, but “just” in transit for a undetermined period of time. The social and relational structure that characterizes familial, clan's and village's habits is totally absent here for migrants that have to reinvent form of relations and mutual help. Grandmothers here strongly contribute to the creation of this space of solidarity, opening a new space for re-articulating the meaning of “traditional gender roles” and gaining authority via “peer” female recognition. While fathers and mothers spend most of their time at work, they live (in) the hamlet. The majority of grandmothers interviewed reported that was the first time that they left their village, and for some of them, the first time that they find themselves out of the patriarchal rules of their family. They have spoken about the hamlet in positive terms, confessing that they like the time they spend here, they love their friends and love to have fun with them.

In a different context such as that of Thai slums, Giuseppe Bolotta brings forward material about the emerging of a female leadership within the slums and how this connects with the practice of work and the way it changed for women with the advent of NGOs as new international actors in the scenario of the capital urban poverty.

In Thailand, as in Indonesia, religion has been used as a vehicle to morally foster a gender representation of women and men, especially within the political domain of action. If compared to other Southeast Asian countries, the social and economic position of Thai women is certainly better. They have been able to vote since 1932, significantly earlier than in many other Asian countries (Iwanaga, 2008:1). Nevertheless, despite the Buddha's acceptance of women within the official *Sangha*, the patriarchal and vertical nature of Thai Buddhism has always provided a moral framework for men's hierarchical precedence over women (Lindberg-Falk, 2008) – today still prevented from ordering as formal *bikkhuni* (women monks). The Thai normative gender polarization links to women an emotional, softer and thus weak mode of expression, unsuitable to public and political roles, where supposed male traits (rational, aggressive and resolute modes of expression) are thought to be required. Therefore, if traditionally in Thai society men have political

and bureaucratic roles (monk, political office, military), women have always mastered trade, and assumed relevant economic roles on the market (Hanks and Hanks, 1963, Kirsch, 1975:172-96, 1985:302-20). Furthermore their place is at home, as mothers.

When they act outside the domestic sphere of action, women are often considered as deviant, while their physical sexuality could be denigrated as impure and dangerous. On the contrary, when they act as mothers, they could gain considerable respect and even be viewed as more moral than men. Although channeled through different systems of meaning, the Thai case, as the Indonesian one outlined by both Alcano and Tabacco, re-proposes the importance of normative gender discourses in articulating the asymmetrical position of men and women within several domains of social action: family, work, and more in general, society.

The neo-liberal and post-colonial reality of the “humanitarian industry”, through the advent of several NGOs in the most marginal – not normative and hardly governable – areas of the global south, has however promoted the circulation of new discourses, values, and ideas able to diversify the ideological homogeneity of the normative local interpretations on gender. This is also the case of Thailand.

Bolotta has been conducting ethnographic research among mothers and children who live in the slums of Bangkok. These women are their main local referents of the many NGOs supporting children’s rights in the slums. Most of Bolotta’s slum informants are rural unskilled villagers who moved to the city after the development boom of the 1960s. Here they had to face a change in the division and practice of work. The process of migration to the city destabilized the normative village-based gender division of labour, making women economically vulnerable, exposed to male violence and abandonment. While rural income and daily reproduction needs were commonly generated through cooperative production within the household, urban income is usually earned outside the household through wage work (Thorbeck, 1987:72-75). In the context of urban economy, however, it’s quite difficult for unskilled mothers to find employment and affordable accommodation. The low-level urban service jobs employ primarily men and young, unmarried, women (Mills, 1999). Slums then became the answer for many, according to research. They are the main source of informal economy within the urban city. Living in the slum means both to get a job and a home to live in. Since men in the slum are often absent, described as unreliable providers, violent, and likely to spend all the time and money with friends, women are very often obliged to take care of their children by themselves. Women living in the slum can make money (as front-door vendors, waste recyclers, etc.), and have a place to live together with their children. Slums became then the place where mothers can put together two of the more traditional female prerogatives: the mastering of the domestic economy and the care of children. These factors have recently made slum women much more engaged in anti-eviction movements than men.

A turning point in the slum women’ economic and social condition is connected to NGOs. The ethnographic cases studied by Bolotta, drawn from his Ph.D. research, focus on how women’s emerging leadership within the slums is linked to local appropriations of politically sensitive Western discourses on childhood, and to the strategic political embodiment and deployment of normative Thai gender attributes. Key (unaware) actors in this process are the many NGOs that operate in the slums. Since the 1970s, in fact, the international concern about the conditions of slum children has brought several aid institutions to act as new political actors in the scenario of the Thai capital and its urban poor. Mothers are their main local referents within the slums and Bolotta's research shows how women have positioned themselves at the centre of numerous networks that gravitate around the care of children, and have built a solid political reputation and

leadership. Slum men, on the other hand, are presented as unreliable, alcoholic and gamblers and are usually detached from the economic and political link with NGOs.

Nels Mulder (1992) has argued that *khunatham*, or “moral goodness” in the Thai world view is exemplified by “the pure love a mother has for her children” and is associated not only with Buddhism, but with “the home, the mother, and the female symbols of Mother Earth and Mother Rice”. “The earth on which we depend for our living, the rice that feeds us, the water that sustains life, and the guardian angel that protects the young child are all represented as female” (Ockey, 1999:35; cf. Mulder, 1992; cf. Anuman, 1955:55-61). Charles Keyes (1984) also pointed out the virtue associated with women in Thai Buddhism. Mothers, indeed, “prove to be inherently good because of their role as mothers”.

Bolotta’s female informants have constructed themselves as exemplary cases of this maternal moral goodness. By assuming the attributes of a normative gender category which historically binds women to the role of mothers - excluding them from the political, locally constructed as a male domain of action – the slum women Bolotta has been focusing on have built a leadership position in which “kind, emotional and soft” motherhood becomes the first requirement of politics: due to this very performed attitude of moral mothers, these women have won the confidence of the NGOs searching for “referents on the spot” to whom delegate the coordination of activities for children. Thanks to the alliance with these powerful national and international partners, slum mothers then built their own political leadership.

Bolotta specifically refers to the well-known case of Prateep Ungsongtham. During the 1970s, Prateep was a young teenager living Khlong Toei, the largest slum in Bangkok. She was concerned with the problem of the education of slum children. Since there were no schools for slum children, in 1968 she decided to open an informal one herself at her parents’ home. The *chumchonmubanpatthana* school (the community development school), was at the roots of the Khlong Toey slum as a politicized community. Around the 1971, indeed, the Port Authority of Thailand, owner of the land, threatened the slum dwellers with forced full eviction. The local school created by the young girl Prateep, from that moment called teacher (*kru*) by all the slum’s inhabitants, became a meeting place and a “symbolic focus” for the first local anti-eviction assemblies (Asia, 1981). Prateep's neighbours finally asked her to put their case to the landowner, the government and the news media. Initially Prateep’s school was declared illegal, but soon the national and international sympathy towards the dramatic picture of her children’s condition in the slum, gave *kru* Prateep’s movement a great public resonance. It was precisely the recognition by slum dwellers of the international political significance of childhood that led the Khlong Toey inhabitants to choose Prateep as their “maternal” leader. Prateep, even today called *kru* (teacher) was in fact depicted by local and international media as a “fairy godmother for Bangkok’s slum children” (Asia, 1981). Constantly pressured by the public opinion, the government finally recognized both her school and slum people’s demands. *Kru* Prateep was then awarded with several international children rights related rewards. With the prize money she established the “Duang Prateep Foundation” (DPF, 2013). It was one of the first foundations for slum children, soon followed by the establishment of several others in all the capital’s slums. In many slums of the capital, children started to move from charity to charity, with their mothers being the “referents on the spot” of the various agencies. Prateep gave slum people political consciousness and started to utilise her skills, knowledge and networks developed since the 1970s both in negotiation between slum networks and state and private sectors for structural change and advocating slum issues in the national agenda. In 2000 she was elected to the Thai Senate representing Bangkok.

Some slum mothers have used NGOs networks to consolidate their socio-economic and political position within the slum. Others, have been able to mobilize these humanitarian networks centred on childcare in order to create a national and transnational political voice able to promote housing rights. When they relate with NGOs networks, they act as kind mothers. On the other side, while acting as community and social movements leaders, these women are far from embodying traditional Thai female traits. By energetically confronting unreliable men, policy makers and the old mafia-like slum leaders, they seem to put forward a re-invented and re-constructed “warrior mother” category of the female. Since the Auytthya period, political leadership in Thailand requires in fact “warrior” virtues as expressed by a militarized society even today lead by the army. Slum women have morally complemented this requirement with their role of mothers.

Slum women, Bolotta argues, are strategically embodying gender categories - historically aimed at subjecting them to maternity and care of the domestic space - to subvert the traditional subservience role that is assigned to them in the local power structure. The use they make of gender is context-bounded. If with NGOs social workers they recite the role of devoted mother and that of vulnerable women abandoned by their mates, once achieved the leadership within the slums, they becomes fierce leaders, revealing the capability of productively using supposed male traits: they energetically lead anti-eviction movements, decide which families are deserving of access into the flow of money provided by the NGOs, and increasingly contend for the leadership of the community to men, once at the summit of the slum power structure.

## **Concluding remarks**

The research of WP3 and some of its researchers uses gender to tackle numerous issues, most importantly those of work, the access of work and disparities. While gender might not be the sole focus of our work, it is nevertheless an unavoidable category and a valuable perspective to access the world of work and how subjectivities at work are build and transformed in different contexts and under different historical events. What emerges so far is the salience and relevance of tradition, like the Indonesian part of our research suggests, the persistence and valuable reference of gender norms and expectations. At the same time we look at gender paradigms as ever-changing and subjected to transformations both at the macro and micro level. We are especially interested in how social actors rework their gender identity and what political potentiality (big or small) such manipulation entails. What the Vietnamese and Thai cases suggest is the importance to look at new forms of political aggregation which are based on gender, revolve around work and the access to capital and resources and to explore their potential.

Work related issues, especially in the marginal areas of the global south, are commonly evaluated through technocratic-quantitative parameters as defined by international agencies such the World Bank. Our research, based on ethnographic and qualitative methods, takes into account the social actors' own perspectives, life trajectories and specific points of view. Our findings reveal how inadequate, weak and depersonalizing a statistic and quantitative evaluation can be, if not adequately integrated with the singular and plural voices of the subjects of research. By leveling contradictions, standardizing social dynamics, and fixing the goodness of a social system on external marketable criteria, the pure quantitative approach often lacks "ecological validity". Besides, the so-called objective research often implies a political agenda directed towards development and intervention, which cannot avoid taking into account the individuals' specific perspectives. For instance, slums and the “slum issue” are commonly framed by material diagnosis

(housing architecture, land property types, socio-economic formal profiling of the inhabitants, etc.) that are incapable of recognizing the individual factors (deep motivations, stories, social implications, advantages, and so on) behind the choice to settle down in a shanty town. Bolotta's research shows how slums, far from being a problem, are a kind of solutions for many unskilled mothers. It also highlights how these globalized urban spaces have provided mothers with ideological capital to build their own political leadership and dignity as women able to compete with men for the community's well-being.

Our advice would be to take into such variety of viewpoints and dimensions in the assessment of gender roles and gendered practices and to refer to qualitative data, local knowledge and local know-hows.

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## **Response to '*Gender at work in Southeast Asia: norms, expectations and local manipulations*'**

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The research has a number of strong theoretical points.

- a) Assuming "gender" as a practical and methodological conceptual space, identifying a specific set of material and cultural relationships
- b) Gender approach is thus conceived as regarding both male and female subjects
- c) The social and cultural processes considered are therefore more realistic and more efficient for any possible policy
- d) Cultural processes are considered according to the idea of "material culture", that is the representations, values, discursive assessments are both engendered by and engendering practical interests and social positionings
- e) The case studies are altogether harmonized and differentiated, thus avoiding both a neo-colonial "orientalism" by assuming an illusional homogeneity of the Asiatic regions and cultures, and a relativistic incommensurability among different cultures.

These major points of value are developed in approaching the issues of work, social and productive division in duties and values. Each case study focuses on the dialectic between dominant and marginal constructions and conceptions of gender and gender roles. Consequently "globalization" is considered according to the double folded dimension of general conditions and general outcomes of individual, local and communitarian attitudes and dispositions. Gender appears at the intersection of formal and informal economical processes and conditions, of discursive orders, uses and representations and, most of all, of differentiated time layers. The "modernization" of the productive processes coexist with the respective "gender memories" and the connected roles and values, in a positive and a negative sense: "emancipated" female workers are still in a gender subaltern relationship to male workers, whereas non emancipated women on the labour market are entering into "leadership" roles.

The results of the research are therefore highly interesting for the policies perspective, due to the added value of realism, and for the theoretical perspective, because of the more pertinent and sometimes astonishing conceptual articulations and connections.