



The Role of Community Libraries in Empowering Female Citizens in Disadvantaged Areas of Thailand

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Abstract:

In Thailand, school-based reading promotion in rural and urban poor areas is limited due to poverty, a lack of children's books, limited knowledge and understanding of early childhood development (ECD) and the value of reading for pleasure (RfP), and some entrenched Thai literacy traditions. Community library projects which engage community members, not only fill a gap in reading promotion in Thailand, but also empower female citizens in marginalized areas. Based on a PhD multiple case study research project (Boonaree, 2018b), this paper discusses best practices in community libraries (CLs) that empower women and girls through personal development, literacy development support, and income generation. Cases showed that the informal atmosphere in CLs encouraged unconfident and disadvantaged people in the rural Northeast (Isan) area of Thailand to enter libraries and attend library activities. CL training programs transformed girls and adult females into confident individuals who were then able to help others and assert their indigenous linguistic identity. These local female reading volunteers are change agents who distribute ECD knowledge and picture books, and mentor mothers to read to their young children. Craft training sessions at the CLs also generated both pleasure and additional income for female villagers.

Keywords: reading promotion, community libraries, reading for pleasure, Thailand, female empowerment

Introduction

Thai women

Two contradictory statistics about the position of women in Thailand were presented in the UN Women's (2017) report on gender equality in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While women represent only 5% of parliamentary seats in the national parliament, the lowest in the region, the percentage of women in research positions is highest in the world, at 56%. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of women holding senior positions in society. Grand Thornton's annual survey of senior management positions held by women in 36 Asian countries showed that Thailand was ranked third for the ratio of women to men in these roles (31%, the global ratio is 25%) (Thai PBS, 2017). The most likely explanation for this, which is different from most Asian countries with a Confucius gender bias, is the closing gender gap in education which began decades ago (Knodel, 1997) and the higher expenditure on education that girls receive over boys. Wongmonta and Glewwe (2017) identified two underlying "daughter obligation" rationales for this; 1) the major caregivers of elderly parents are expected to be daughters (not sons in the Confucius ideology), and 2) "wage incomes of daughters are more reliable sources of remittances for parents than the wage incomes of sons" (p.183).

Although these statistics about women's work and education in the modern Thai society are encouraging, the representation of women in positions of political power is considered vital to addressing issues of inequality throughout society (UNICEF, 2007). The low representation of women in Thailand's parliament is cause for concern, therefore, especially as Thailand has been identified as the world's most unequal nation (Credit Suisse, 2018). Due to deep-rooted social conventions, women and girls in more traditional and socio-economically deprived areas rarely enjoy this kind of opportunity and success (Davis, 2019).

Additionally, economic disparity and the wide gap between the quality of schooling in urban and rural areas have long hindered social development in the country (Frederickson, 2016). Non-formal education and other learning opportunities are, therefore, one approach to promoting equality, not only between genders but also between those women and girls who live in modern urban societies and those living in societies that are more traditional. Promoting literacy through reading for pleasure (RfP) initiatives can have a positive impact on women's social and economic position. Firstly, RfP increases literacy skill and ability, leading to educational success and thus enhanced employment opportunities and earning power (OECD, 2010). This is particularly vital for impoverished girls under the "daughter obligation" tradition because, in contrast to middle class girls, many of them are removed from school at a young age to earn money for the family. In addition, research has shown that regular RfP can empower people to make positive changes to their lives by providing confidence and inspiration (The Reading Agency, 2016).

Reading Promotion and Community Libraries

While countries around the world have initiated RfP programmes through libraries, there are obstacles to their implementation in the Thai library system as it currently operates. One challenge is the complex nature of reading promotion which is delivered by diverse authorities and organisations depending on the type of libraries. There is no central authority responsible for reading promotion in the country and, until 2017, there was no national reading policy. At present, the National Library and National Reading Framework are under different departments

within the Ministry of Culture and neither have authority over public or primary school libraries that operate under two separate offices in the Ministry of Education. This makes the promotion of reading in the country, particularly at the local community level, ineffective and thus it has been neglected for a long time (Sacchanand, Prommaphan, & Sacchanand, 2008; Wimolsittichai, 2017). The development of community libraries, however, seems to hold promise for a more effective approach to reading promotion.

Stranger-Johannessen (2014, p.93) defined a community library (CL) in developing countries as “a library, or a library-like collection and lending service, that is not part of a public library program and is run by one or more people from the community it serves”. In disadvantaged communities in Thailand, village reading centres/corners, established in 1972, have served the needs of people and can be considered a form of CLs, given this definition. Throughout the world, the role of CLs in tackling inequalities has been manifest. Historically, CLs in Africa have been established as an alternative to post-colonial public libraries which, it is argued, cannot adequately serve the information needs of contemporary African populations (Alemna, 1995). Research undertaken in other developing countries also indicates that the more formal public libraries do not serve poorer communities effectively (Chisita, & Chiparausha, 2017; Ndumu & Mon, 2018). For these reasons, it has been suggested that CLs can better serve community needs. Asselin and Doiron (2013) concluded that CLs represent the newest type of libraries in the developing world. An IFLA publication confirmed their conclusion by mentioning that CLs are one of the “New Initiatives for the Provision of Public Libraries” in Africa (Chisita, & Chiparausha, 2017, p.35).

Because women and girls are often among the most socially and economically disadvantaged, particularly in rural and deprived areas, CLs are considered important vehicles through which they can build and support their literacy, learning and future opportunities. In Nepal, for example, READ (Rural Education and Development) Centres provide special women’s sections and literacy classes aimed at providing a safe space for the females of the community to meet and promoting female empowerment. The authors concluded that, “The CL might be the only place where women and girls can safely gather, learn, solve problems and obtain the information and training they need to take control of their lives as well as influence their families and communities” (Shrestha & Krolak, 2014). p. 412). In Burkino Faso, a CL reading initiative empowered young women to take control of their sexual health (Kevane, 2015). Involvement in running CL initiatives can also empower women to develop their skills and confidence, including their participation in librarianship and leadership training (Moyo, & Chibaya, 2017).

This paper presents selected findings from research on CL projects in marginalized areas of the Northeast of Thailand (Isan), the most socioeconomic disadvantaged region in the country. It focuses specifically on those programmes and initiatives which have the potential to empower female citizens.

Methodology

The research applied a multiple case study design. Data were collected from 8 CLs (identified by number below) in Isan. The CLs were selected through both purposive and “reputational case selection” (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 32). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (participants are given pseudonyms in the presentation of results), unobtrusive observations, and documentary analysis. The interview data provided an understanding of the current situation and operation of each CL while the unobtrusive

observation supplemented the interview data and included library visits and attendance at library activities. Documentary sources provided background information and an understanding of each CL. The data gathered were entered into Nvivo data analysis software, coded and theoretically categorized, from which the themes below emerged.

Findings and Discussions

Despite the obstacles to CL development and RfP programme provision noted above, the research did identify some best practices that can empower women and girls in the libraries visited. These are categorised as: personal development; literacy development support; and income generation.

1. Personal development

In general, Thai people are less assertive and less competitive than those in other Asian countries, having the lowest masculinity score in Asia (Hofstede Insights, 2018). This distinctive low success-oriented and success-driven nature of Thai people is more pronounced in the Isan area (Myers, 2005). Generally, low educational attainment and extreme poverty is the cause of low socio-economic status and, in the case of Isan, there are additional ethnolinguistic issues including the historical central Thai suppression and the generally lower occupational and social status compared to Bangkok (Keyes, 2014). This all contributes to the formation of a humble, unconfident, and marginalised Isan identity. This can be particularly marked among women who are often constrained by conventional notions of gender roles.

Cases showed that the informal atmosphere in CLs encouraged unconfident and disadvantaged women in rural Isan, to enter libraries and attend library activities. The informal atmosphere is particularly important for those who perceive themselves as inferior. Even those with higher education achievements can feel ill at ease in official settings because of their humble origins. A female university student from a rural background did not feel comfortable using formal public libraries, for example, saying: “Even as a university student, I don’t dare to use the big public library in the district. It looks very formal. I feel too tense to use it. If I were a teacher, I would dare to use it” (Boonta, CL7). Her thinking is confirmed by an early childhood development (ECD) teacher, “I absolutely agree about the self-confidence issue of rural Isan people. We are modest rural people; thus we look at people who dare to use the public library and question why they are confident to enter there!” This once unconfident ECD teacher had attended training sessions run by Happy Reading (a reading promotion agency) to make handcrafted picture books and she also gained further knowledge about picture books and ECD. As a result, she was totally transformed into a happy, confident, handmade picture book trainer in the province. She affirmed that the training sessions changed her life and contributed not only to her career development but also the community, confirming Moyo and Chibaya’s (2017) conclusion about the positive impact of CL initiatives for those women leading and assisting with them.

The inferiority complex noted above was recognised by some Isan participants who believed that it hindered Isan people’s personal development. The leader in CL7 suggested that if Isan children could “break the shell” of their inferiority complex, it would positively benefit their personal development. With this in mind, he established the CL and an NGO, and organised training sessions that aimed to transform rural people into confident persons. Confidence gained from CL training sessions and being involved in a range of CL activities encouraged Boonta and her friends to be confident young women which is unusual among Isan

students. Since extreme vertical social relationships focussed on order, formality, and total obedience still exist in Thai education overall (Ekkachai, 2017), their teachers perceived them as "stubborn children". As a result, the young people participating in the CL have been closely watched and discouraged to join its activities. However, the CL7 leader found that when these youngsters finished school and entered university they were more confident and advanced in terms of personal development than he was at their age. This group of students was also more assertive. Boonta and her friends from CL7 were confident and proud to show their indigenous linguistic identity when meeting with people from central Thailand and also in Bangkok where the Isan language is normally perceived as the language of the labouring class.

Despite the positive impact on these young women's confidence and sense of self, some female CL volunteers self-identified as "uncommon/strange" villagers because they knew that some villagers disapproved of their outstanding voluntary work in the library. The library volunteers who were judged by other villagers as "strange" reflect the distinctive low Masculinity characteristic of the Thai culture (Hofstede Insights, 2018) which disapproves of heroism and assertiveness. This means that Thais prefer to show modesty and that standing out from the crowd is not acceptable or admirable. This is perhaps even more pronounced among females who, in this traditional, socially conservative region, are encouraged to conform to conventional gender roles and behaviour.

Most female participants in the study said that their own personal priority was their education. Female participants, who married young, were aware that they lacked training and education; thus, they needed to seek informal opportunities to gain more knowledge via every channel, including their local CLs. Through engagement with the CLs many had become avid readers and even local and national trainers for children's storytime and health promotion via books. This again highlights the positive impact of the CL on girls' and women's lives in the communities.

2. Literacy development support

The longstanding Thai tradition that allows only teachers to teach and transfer knowledge to students means that home-school partnerships are rare in Thai culture (Deveney, 2005; Hallinger, 2010). Cultural factors therefore discourage parents from becoming involved with their children's development in their early years. Thai literacy traditions are discussed in detail in *Opening Minds: The Thai Literacy Traditions Affecting Reading for Pleasure* (Boonaree, 2018c). It was not until education reform policies in 2008 that parental involvement in education was encouraged in Thailand. Despite this change, Hallinger and Lee (2011) found that without the prior engagement of school staff and adequate training, cultural transformation and overall education reform progressed slowly. The reluctance or delay in adopting change is related to the normative nature of Thai society. Within The Hofstede Centre's (Hofstede Insights, 2018) measurement of "National Cultural Dimensions", Thailand has a low score on the "Long Term Orientation" element compared with other pragmatic Asian countries such as Japan and Vietnam. This cultural aspect tends to contribute to the slow adjustment to new literacy ideas discussed in this article.

Reading to young children is one literacy practice that has been only slowly adopted in Thailand. The most important barriers to its acceptance are the learning traditions noted above, high book prices, and limited knowledge of ECD. In 2015, most Thai parents generally did not read to young children because they did not understand the enjoyment and value that young children gain from language stimulation from birth. The Bookstart project (BSP), a book-

gifting and caregiver mentoring programme run through CLs, is particularly important for families in poverty as they often cannot afford children's books. The BSP was also found to motivate 60-70% of parents to acquire additional picture books, which would not have occurred if the picture books were not initially provided for free (MGR Online, 2015).

The great impact of poverty and the mother's education on storytime practice makes the encouragement of mothers in disadvantaged areas to read to their children of the utmost importance. The National Statistical Office (2016) found that the presence of children's books in the home in Isan is the lowest in the country. The same survey showed that children in the richest wealth quintile were around 3 times more likely to own three or more children's books compared to those in the poorest wealth quintile (72.6% and 22.9% respectively). This is the same pattern for mothers with no education who are three times less likely to provide books for their children compared to mothers with higher education (15.4% and 63.4% respectively).

The findings of our research showed that if caregivers, who are mostly female, are guided and trained by CLs or active female village health volunteers, they can perform well and greatly appreciate the results of reading to their young children. For caregiver training, the study found that leaders in RfP in rural areas said that the most effective technique to encourage caregivers to share books with their children was to arrange an event showcasing reading models - pairings of a caregiver and a child who are successful examples of reading to young children. In addition, in this rural collective society, the introduction of a BSP, or any new initiative, was more successful if it was developed as a shared activity. In Southeast Asian collective societies, group gatherings normally bring enjoyment, support and respected social relations among community members (Ngamwittayaphong, 2011; Pandian, 2011) and so CLs need to consider this and capitalise upon it to encourage the participation of community women. The role of CL spaces in promoting RfP is discussed in a previous IFLA paper (Boonaree, 2018a).

One case in the research illustrates an uncommon upbringing for Thailand 30 years ago where a mother had not tried to control her two daughters' access to "light" reading materials which were the only reading materials with pictures available in district markets. The sisters, who were now community reading leaders, had been supported in their reading of the one baht graphic novels which contain romance, murders, and ghostly scenes. The women had become confident and progressive Isan women who ran a successful NGO focusing on health promotion in CLs and also promoted other urban poor communities in their use of books for literacy development. Currently, they are both invited by Happy Reading to talk about community-based reading promotion at a national level, empowering both them and the women they meet.

As for adult female readers, the cases showed that rural people generally are eager to read as long as they can access books that suit their interests and are of sufficient quality and variety. Female villagers were found to prefer cookbooks and crafting books and participants commented that the government should provide more funds to acquire a good variety of quality reading material at the community level to suit their needs and encourage their engagement with books and reading with the aim of improving their literacy and quality of life.

3. Income generation

Most CLs in Thailand originated as village reading corners as a part of informal education aiming to encourage people in local communities to get better qualifications, support their lifelong learning, and enhance their career prospects. Reading corners are jointly operated by

local volunteers and sub-district ONIE teachers (SOT) from the Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE). A study by TK Park (2010) indicates that people with primary education, and those who work in the agricultural sector use the village/community library the most, suggesting they are reaching their target audience. In 2013, ONIE transformed the reading corners in 41,800 villages into Smart Book Houses (SBHs).

Female villagers in the study enjoyed the opportunity to access magazines that provide general knowledge and crafting methods in SBHs that enabled them to make Buddhist ceremonial crafts and sometimes supplement their income through their crafting. The craft training sessions showed that ONIE CLs not only provide materials for RfP in rural areas but also make a positive contribution to many aspects of community life and thus serve as “central players in personal, social, cultural and economic improvement in their communities” (Asselin, Abebe & Doiron, 2014, p. 5). Participants noted that when serial publications were withdrawn from the CLs in the rural areas because of budget cuts, including the magazines the women so enjoyed and benefited from, RfP reduced considerably. While the CLs in this study did facilitate income generation for women, primarily through craft production, they did not appear to facilitate employability, as found in Africa (Asselin & Doiron, 2013).

It should be noted that in most cases, library volunteers and female village health volunteers, who greatly determined the success of the CLS and RfP initiatives such as the BSPs, were middle-aged women who had limited educational opportunities at an early age. An example is an active female Head of Village, an avid reader who provided space in the front of her shop for an award-winning SBH to serve the community. Her example shows that her lack of educational opportunity, due to “daughter obligation” to work for the family, did not prevent her becoming a strong Isan woman who was a confident, successful business woman and a role model who encouraged others to read through the provision of the SBH.

Conclusion

This paper discusses roles of CLs that empower women and girls through personal development, literacy development support, and income generation. Under the two prominent Thai cultural dimensions -normative culture and extreme feminine society- confidence is the key that stimulate women and girls to “break from the shell” of Isan inferiority and perform to their full potential. The evidence from this research suggests that CLs can develop girls’ and women’s confidence in a range of ways. This challenges conventional cultural norms to an extent, however, and can attract criticism. Nevertheless, despite some disapproval from traditional eyes, CLs benefitted females in disadvantaged communities in many ways. They offered the women and girls participating in this study the opportunity to read, learn, develop their confidence, take on leadership roles, generate some income and discover their potential. In so doing, the CLs supported female informal education, empowerment, earning potential, future career development, citizenship and participation in democratic processes. CLs in Thailand can thus play an important role in supporting women to take control of their own lives and challenge social norms that limit their full participation and self-expression in the Thai society.

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