

Women Oppression Through Intersectionality: A Case Study from Somboon, A Woman Life's Experience

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Abstract

Feminist theory is based on the variety of real-life stories women as knowledge. Women are different in terms of intersectionality such as class, education, ethnicity, religion, and so on that impact on their lives' oppression. This study used a qualitative research method and identified data by using ethnography and narrative. The data was collected from an in-depth interview with a case study, a woman who is from a working-class, and low education. Somboon life's story is a voice of a woman who had experience with sexual harassment, she was abused by men since she was young until she married, her life also was oppressed from male domination, class, economic, culture, norms as intersecting oppression. However, women can negotiate and have resistance by using some strategies or tactics to negotiate with the power relations in the society. Somboon uses her docile-bodies power, and economic capital strategy to change her life. Women's life experience is knowledge. We still need more women's voices and learn from women's life experiences to bring out gender equality. Then, the demand for women's voices and life experiences still needs more exploring.

Keywords: women oppression, women's life experience, intersectionality

A Case Study from Somboon, A Woman Life's Experience

This study used a qualitative research method and identified data by using ethnography and narrative. The data was collected from an in-depth interview with a woman who is from the working class. I asked her to share her life experience and asked permission to record her voice. We talked in the garden at my home which surrounding by trees, birds, and nobody there. Michaelle Zimbalist Rosaldo (1974) mentioned that women may be important, powerful, and influential, but it seems that, relative to men of their age and social status, women everywhere lack generally recognized and culturally valued authority.

Feminist theory is based on the variety of real-life stories women provide about themselves. Lugones, Maria, and Spelman, Elizabeth (1983) mention to the demand of "women's voices" be heard invites some further directions in the exploration of women's lives and discourse or excludes others. The demand and the desire of women should be heard, otherwise, it is a kind of amputation if we are just being silenced in our account of our life.

Somboon life's story is a voice of a woman who had experience with sexual harassment, she was abused by males since she was young until she married, her life was oppressed because of male domination, class, economic, culture, norms, and labor of division as well. It is interesting how the life experience of Somboon can negotiate women's oppression or sexual violence. We can learn from Somboon's life experience and this is her life's story;

Somboon is 56 years old. She works as a gardener at the HIP development house village where I live. I have seen her working sometimes around the village, and I had a chance to talk with her in one day. She told about her story a bit, and I think her life experience is very interesting. I want to get to know more about her life experience. Somboon is from a working-class and poor family. Her father was

Indian and lived in Changklan, Chiang Mai. Her mother was a local northern Thai person who lived in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. After they married, they lived in the Hang Dong district of Chiang Mai province, doing rice farms and being hired labor. Somboon's parents had 9 children: 6 males and 3 females, she is the eighth child. Her father died since she was 6 years old and her mother died since she was 12 years old. During her parent died she stayed with her aunt and her sixth sister. She graduated from Pathom 4 or grade 4 when she was 14 years old. She stopped going to school for 3 years. Normally, children graduate in grade 4 when they are 10 years old. Her parents did not have money to pay for school fees or even the student uniform. After her parents died, she stayed with her aunt. But she was almost being raped by her uncle-in-law. Then she had to leave and stay with her sixth sister, but she also had sexual harassment by her brother-in-law. Then she had to leave her sister's house again.

“My parents were very poor (“Tuke”—in northern Thai language). I started to go to school in the first grade when I was 8 years old. After that, I had to stop going to school for 3 years because my parents did not have money to pay for the school fee and bought school uniforms for me. When my parents died, my brothers and sister had to stay with our cousins. My life was not smooth, after my parents died, I stayed with my aunt. One day my uncle-in-law wanted to rape me and I made a decision to move and stayed with my sister. At night, my brother-in-law was doing sexual harassment to me (“Ngom”—in northern Thai language). I did not want to tell my sister, I worried that she would not satisfy me if I told her about that story because she always supported her husband. Then I had to move again and stayed with a couple that I called “Lung” (uncle) and “Paa” (aunt).” —Interviewed Somboon on 30 October 2016

When she was 15 years old, she worked with a couple who run a noodle shop business, called “Ran Pa Chaleow” in Hang Dong. Every day she woke up at 4 am. and worked until evening. They paid her 30 baht per day. One day, she went with her friends to a temple fair, we called “Ngan Wat” during night time. The male boss that she called “Lung” told her brother about this and her brother was not satisfied and punished her because they did not allow women to go outside during night time.

“Lung was not satisfied with me when I went out to “Ngan Wat” with my friends at night time. He told me that your brother (“Aei”—in northern Thai language) asked me to take care of you and you should not do that. He told this to my brother, my brother was very angry. He beat me and slapped my face two times. I could not stay at that place. I moved out and stayed with Paa Jantha and be a dancer”. —Interviewed Somboon on 30 October 2016

After she left a noodle shop, she worked with Paa Jantha who was a dancer, during that time she was 18 years old. She traveled with Paa Jantha everywhere that they hired dancers to show in the events such as temple fairs, weddings, and so on. She traveled around Northern provinces and the farthest was in Nakhon Pathom, the central region of Thailand. She earned 30 baht/day for dancing. She could save money about 1,600 baht during she worked here and she kept her saving money with her brother. Later on, she had to stop working as a dancer when she was 20 years old because Paa Jantha stopped her business. After her brother died, her sister-in-law wanted to keep her saving money and cheat her but she fought about this and got money back from her later.

“I need to have money then I was going to be a dancer that I could save money. They paid me 30 baht per day. If there was no dancing job, I made extra income and sold Thai dessert, called Ruam-Mith, in front of the municipality of Hang Dong district (Naa-Amphoe Hang Dong— in Thai local language) at 8 am. and moved to sell the desert at the Saimoon school in the evening. I woke up early morning about 2 am. preparing and making dessert kinds of stuff for selling in the morning. I could save

money about 1,600 baht; it was a lot of money if compared with the value of money at present; it was about more than 10,000 baht. I got 30 baht per day from dancing, I did not have many expenditures, it was so hard to find the money. When I got money, I asked my brother to keep my money for saving because I trusted him. When my brother died, I asked for my saving from his wife, she said to me that “my brother spent all my money to build a house”. I told her that “if she did not pay me, I had to sell my brother’s land otherwise she had to pay cash to me about 1,600 baht. She feared that I would sell the land. Then she returned all my money later on. I kept and hid my saving money by myself. I worked all kinds of jobs that they hired me to do. I did not have mother and father, I stayed alone.” —Interviewed Somboon on 30 October 2016

Later, she worked as a housemaid in one house for 5 months, but she had to quit because the male owner did sexual harassment to her.

“When I worked as a housemaid, I had the sexual harassment experience again. When the female house owner was not at home, the male house owner told me that if I had free time, I should come to see him and massage him. I thought it was weird and I did not trust him. I left from that house and did not go back there again.” —Interviewed Somboon on 30 October 2016

Then she moved to work at a mushroom plant. She worked so hard because she wanted to save money. They paid her about 30 baht for shift work. She worked for three shifts per day: 4-8 am. —to collect mushrooms, 8 am. – 4 pm. —to contribute mushrooms to Kad Muang Mai market, and 4 pm. till night—to sell mushrooms at the Phayom market. She also got some extra income for selling mushrooms during the evening time; she earned about 150 baht/day. While she worked here, she met her boyfriend and married him in 1982; she had one daughter with him later. He was a good man; he gave all money to her. They bought a small land about 60 square meters and built a house together. She worked at the mushroom plant for 6 years. After the mushroom plant stopped its enterprise, she and her husband worked as hired labor for 3 years, such as construction jobs, off-farm jobs, and so on. After that, they got a job at a garden located opposite HIP village and worked there for 8 years. They paid them about 60 baht/day. In 1995, they moved to work at a restaurant for two years because they paid them higher about 100 baht per day. She said she needed more money for paying for her daughter’s schooling.

In 1997, She and her husband got a job at the one school in Chiang Mai to be the janitors that paid about 4,100 baht/month. They also had some extra income from teachers to do gardening during weekends at their house and sold the recyclable material that they collected from the school. They worked in that school for 5 years because the school did not have a budget to hire them anymore.

In 2003, Somboon started working at HIP development house village. After 1 year, her husband also got a job there. She was happy because it was near her house. They hired them as gardeners about 300 baht/day. However, they also got extra income from people in the village who hired them to do gardening at their houses.

In 2009, her husband had a minor wife, in Thai we called “Mea Noi”; he changed his behavior—started drinking alcohol and did not give money to her. He spent money on his “Mea Noi”. He drank alcohol both in the daytime and nighttime. He often spent time with his “Mea Noi”. Somboon suffered a lot. She said she wanted to kill herself or to run away from this suffering, but she was thinking about her nephew during that time. Then she stopped thinking about killing herself. In 2011, her husband killed himself because he did not know how to cope with this situation.

“In the past, my husband was a good man. He did not drink alcohol. Every month, he got money from his hired job; he always gave all money to me about 3,000 baht per month. I saved money, and we bought land to build our small house. The land belonged to my mother-in-law. She mortgaged her land

with rich people. We redeemed that land from him. Later, my husband “addicted” to a woman (“Tid-Puying” —in the Thai language) during 2009. The woman was his ex-girlfriend. I asked for some money from him to help me to renovate our house because it was small now. I wanted to extend one more room and extended space for doing the higher roof because it was hot. He got money about 10,000 baht per month during he worked at the HIP. He said, “he will give money to me but his voices did not satisfy for that”. He had never given money to me. He started to addict to alcohol and drank it in the daytime. His behavior changed, I knew he had another woman, but I did not want to complain to him at home because I worried that my daughter was not happy about that if she knew. He had two hearts; I told him that if he wanted to stay with that woman, he had to divorce me. He did not want to divorce me but he did not want to stop a relationship with that woman. He paid money to her when she wanted to buy the kinds of stuff. I saw the bills when he used credit to buy the kinds of stuff for her. I was tired (“Tor”—in northern Thai language) why he did like that, we had a daughter and a nephew. He talked to me badly that I had sex with my son-in-law. I did not do that. He was not friendly when he talked with me because he wanted to see that woman even late at night about 11 pm. He went out to see her even it was far. Later, he could not make a decision, and he drank poisonous drinking and died. I thought he was drunk too. He drank a lot, a bottle of that poisonous; [During this time, she was silent for a while and had tears in her eyes]. I was suffering and tired about my life, I also wanted to die but I was thinking about my nephew that changed my mind. I felt like I should not give up and fought for my life. I tried to save money and I sold my old car to renovate my house. I am renovating my house now; it is not finished yet but will be soon.” —Interviewed Somboon on 30 October 2016.”

Now, she stays with her daughter, son-in-law, and nephew at her house. In her family, she still has one sister and one brother; the others have died. Her fourth sister is taking care of her seventh brother. She said, “one thing that she wants to do is to renovate an old small house for her brother who has amnesia”. In the future, she said, “she might stay with her brother and take care of him if her sister cannot take care of him because she is a bit old now”. Now she gives him about 1,000 baht per month. She said, “she has never given up on her life”.

As from Somboon’s life experience who is a woman in a working-class and has low education. Somboon was oppressed from poverty that related to her class, patriarchal system, and she also was abused by men in her life; her brother-in-law, uncle-in-law, and her boss when she was a housemaid, including her husband who had a minor wife that was abused her mind that it made her painful. This is her voices;

“My life was not smooth, after my parents died, I stayed with my aunt. One day my uncle-in-law wanted to rape me, and I made a decision to move and stayed with my sister. At night, my brother-in-law was doing sexual harassment to me. I did not want to tell my sister, I worried that she would not satisfy me if I told her about that story because she always supported her husband. Then I had to move again.”

“When I worked as a housemaid, I had the sexual harassment experience again. When the female house owner was not at home, the male house owner told me that if I had free time, I should come to see him and massage him. I thought it was weird and I did not trust him. I left from that house and did not go back there again.”

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if he wanted to stay with that woman, he had to divorce me. He did not want to divorce me but he did not want to stop a relationship with that woman. He paid money to her when she wanted to buy the stuff. I saw the bills when he used credit to buy the kinds of stuff for her. I was tired of why he did like that, we had a daughter and a nephew. He talked to me badly that I had sex with my son-in-law. I did not do that. He was not friendly when he talked with me because he wanted to see that woman even late at night about 11 pm. He went out to see her even it was far. Later, he could not make a decision, and he drank poisonous drinking and died [During this time, she was silent for a while and had tears in her eyes]. I was suffering and tired about my life, I also wanted to die..."

Somboon received low wage rates during she has worked in many places, because she has low education, and because she is a woman that they normally paid low rate as women's jobs such as cooking, cleaning the house and so on. However, Somboon could work as men's role such as doing construction work. In a traditional local northern Thai society, women have to follow traditional norms, men can do but women cannot do; Somboon was punished violently by her brother because she went outside with her friends at the temple fair during night time.

"Lung was not satisfied with me when I went out to "Ngan Wat" with my friends during night time. He told me that, "your brother ("Aei" —in northern Thai language) asked me to take care you, then you should not do like that". He told this story to my brother; my brother was very angry. He beat me and slapped my face for two times. I could not stay at that place. Then, I moved out..."

Nevertheless, the kinship relationship is strong in local northern Thai culture to support each other, for instance, when her parents died, she stayed with her relatives. Nowadays her sister and she still take care of her brother who is sick.

In Somboon life's experience can be explained in terms of feminist concepts including intersectionality, women voices, women oppression, women's life experience, and sexual violence. Feminist scholars argued that gender, race, and class are interconnected as "intersecting oppressions". Intersectionality is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. Intersectionality holds that the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, classism, and belief-based bigotry, do not act independently of one another. Instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the "intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989). Mohanty (1984) argues that an analysis of "sexual difference" in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what she calls the "Third World Difference" which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes in these countries. Penny Van Esterik (1999) mentions that Thai women are not a single oppressed category, but rather a great variability by region, class, ethnicity, etc. within Thailand.

Women's oppression occurred across a broad range of disciplines; feminists have extended Marxist theories of the exploitation of labor within capitalism to look at women's position in paid employment such as the sexual division of labor within the household. Ferguson (1989), Walby (1986: 1990), Lerner (1986), and O'Brien (1981), believe the basis of women's subordination to be located outside class relation and have developed the theory of patriarchy as a relatively separate system of exploitation. Male domination was systematic and affected all areas of women's lives and women's oppression. Cultural or norms seem to be of growing importance to feminism. The power relations of pornography, abortion, male violence, technology, and science have increasingly come to be seen not

only in terms of social institutions and practices but also in terms of symbolic meaning, the formation of identities, and deeply rooted belief systems (Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey, 1992).

MacKinnon (1989) claims that sexual desire and behavior in male-dominant society are related to gender struggles. Sexuality is not a separate area of just feeling, interaction, and sensation but it is a pervasive dimension throughout the whole social life and gender dimension through socially constituted which include social division. She critiques that sexuality is a product of men's power and means men's control over women. Sexual harassment is one form of violence or oppression of female sexuality. It is a manifestation of power relations. Women are much more likely to be victims of sexual harassment because they are more lack power than men, are in a vulnerable position, and have more socialize in silence. Sexual harassment has been existing since the twentieth century, women began to speak out against sexual harassment at work and have diverse problems with naming. The term sexual harassment was invented as part of women's renaming of the world, reflecting and constructing women's experience and labeling a form of behavior newly recognized as something which women need not passively endure, but can actively protest and resist (Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997).

Conclusion

Somboon's life experience that identified from ethnography and narrative research method in this paper, indicated that a woman's life experience is situated knowledge (Haraway (1985). Women are different, women's lives experience are different from their intersectionality, intersecting social identities, and related systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination in the patriarchy system. Power can come from our bodies, or "docile bodies". Experience is not from the brain, but it is embodied and situated knowledge (Haraway (1985). However, it is dynamic—not static.

As Foucault (Monique Deveaux,1999) said "where there is power, there is resistance", women can negotiate and have resistances by using some strategies or tactics to negotiate with the power relations in the society. It is interesting in this case how women use their life experiences to empower and use intersectionality to support their negotiation. Somboon uses her power from her bodies, her life experience, working hard, and saving money as economic capital to change her life. Rosaldo (1974) mentioned that women can have more power and value. In some women, her economic contribution and her control of foodstuffs permit her to influence men. There are societies in which domestic and public spheres are distinguished, but in which privileged women, by taking on men's roles, achieve considerable status and power.

However, we still need more women's voices and learn from women's life experiences in this society to make the world change and more equity among gender.

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