Differences in Women’s and Men’s Employment in Hydropower Resettlement Areas: Some Gender Perspectives

Zhong Mei

Graduate Student, GMS Study
Greater Mekong Sub-regional Study Center (GMSSC) of Yunnan University, China
Email: zmeimay@163.com

Abstract

Gender-related issues figure high on the global research and policy agenda especially economic issues such as employment and inequity between men and women. My research focuses on the gender situation in employment practices in hydropower resettlement areas in Liuku Town of Yunnan Province. My research also affords comparisons between the situation of men and women in terms of their life before and after resettlement, differences in opportunities for employment, and the changes in social division of labor. Through comparing these factors, my research explores and explains the reasons for the differences between women’s and men’s employment situation and offers recommendations to restore gender equity in employment. A number of factors affect employment and resettlement in the reservoir area including national policy, men’s and women’s education situation, and marital status. The research offers a better understanding of the ongoing changes in women’s employment and provides methods to bridge the employment differences between men and women. The research results are expected to be useful for local women or people to increase their understanding of the employment opportunities and skills required in the resettlement areas.
Introduction

My research focuses on the resettlement area village called Xiao Shaba that has been built for the planned Liuku hydropower project in Liuku Town, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province. The research aims to analyze the employment differences between men and women in Xiao Shaba. Liuku Town hosts the seat of Nujiang Prefecture’s government, and is located across the Gaoligong Mountains, East of Myanmar, South of Lu Zhang Town, and North of Shangjiang Township. The town is surrounded by high mountains, deep valleys, and steep ravines (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Liuku Town surrounded by high mountains

Figure 2. Liuku Town surrounded by deep gorges
Hydropower development in this area is influenced by issues of reservoir resettlement, especially the lack of employment opportunity in the reservoir resettlement area. It is increasingly important to solve the issue of hydropower resettlement so that people resettled by the dam can benefit from hydropower development. Once I had finished my field trip in Nujiang Liuku, I realized that the Liuku hydropower station hasn’t been built yet. However, the reservoir resettlement has been completed. Moreover, resettlement has a lot of impacts on local people’s employment situation and is a key point of gender inequality. It is worth exploring what factors impact on employment, and among these impacts, what are the key differences between men and women.

My research will identify the gaps in employment opportunity between men and women. Then, it will identify the related causes of gender inequity in terms of employment opportunity. The results could contribute to raising the awareness of the affected people in the reservoir resettlement area especially about the role of women. My research emphasizes the changes in employment situation and prospects after resettlement, and compares the income of people before and after resettlement. This also provides an understanding of the changes in income structure and comparisons between men and women, including their life situation before and after resettlement, differences in employment opportunity, and the changes in social division of labor. My research aims to show that gender inequality if a pressing concern in the resettlement areas in the context of the women themselves, present policy constraints and societal norms, and that the gender inequality in employment needs to be urgently and effectively addressed.

**Methodology**

This study’s methodology is based on a qualitative approach. Drawing from a literature review, I frame my research using “Rights” and “Rites” as analytical concepts to understand how decision-making processes take place and can be strengthened. The data collection was undertaken at two levels: at the national/state level; and at the village/community level. Methods include studies.
This was done with the aim of getting the Liuku Hydropower reservoir resettlement’s original employment data and reports, and data of re-employment before and after resettlement to get an overview of the work and employment situation in the resettlement area. The field research consisted of household questionnaires, focus group discussions and extensive interviews with the affected local residents, village heads and local officials in order, focusing on work and employment issues.

I did a field survey in October in Nujiang Liuku to get more information about the situation of resettlement and employment. This consisted of the following activities:

1. Structured interview with experts: This structured interview was a household survey interview with households to get a general understanding of affected local people’s job conditions and incomes, especially women’s job conditions. I interviewed four government officials: the minister and vice-minister of Immigration in Lushui County, and two deputy directors of Immigration of Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture.

2. Semi-structured interviews with local people: this involved interviews with local officials and village heads to get information related to the effect of hydropower station’s resettlement project on local people’s livelihoods, and the situation of women’s employment. In my field trip, I interviewed the leaders of three groups in Xiao Shaba to get an understanding of the resettlement plan.

3. Survey questionnaire: The survey included 30 people (15 men: 5 people over 60 years old, 8 people between 40-60 years old, 2 people between 20-40 years old; 15 women: 2 people over 60 years old, 8 people between 40-60 years old, 5 people between 20-40 years old).

4. I interviewed five shop owners (employers in Xiao Shaba Building Materials Market).

5. Focus group discussions: This was used to discuss key issues about employment and to get the perspectives of men and women in the resettled communities. I interviewed 15 households in Xiao Shaba village.
to get information about the influence of resettlement and the employment situation.

These steps were accompanied by discussions with my mentor and designing the initial research questions and identifying key informants for interviews. This process allowed me to get a deeper understanding of the background of immigration in Xiao Shaba Village, the employment situation before and after immigration and resettlement. In addition, I could also make a before and after comparison in relation to income sources, income structure, and the change to the community way of life.

My last step was data analysis and report writing using the research investigation and materials. Data was analyzed to see whether men’s and women’s work employment was equal, to explore the gender-based factors affecting inequality in employment, and how to solve the gender differences in employment opportunities.

Results

a. The general situation of Xiao Sha New Village

There are three groups in the Xiao Shaba resettlement area. The three groups have in total 170 households, 1,069 people in total (from official statistics in November 2014). There are 268 women and 801 men. The main ethnicity is Lisu, with a small number of ethnic Bai people. The local government designed and built two layers of house per household for the resettled people in Xiao Shaba (see Figures 3 and 4).

In addition, the local government moved the old building materials market nearer to the Xiao Shaba New Village (Figure 5). However, several storekeepers in the building materials market state that, nowadays, the local economy and the building materials business was not so good, hence the workers’ wages were also low.
Figure 3: Houses in the resettlement area of Xiao Shaba New Village

Figure 4: Houses and shops in the resettlement area of Xiao Shaba New Village

Figure 5: The building materials market in its new location
b. Changes in social division of labor

Xiao Shaba Village (now called Xiao Shaba New Village) is a typical mountain farming village in Yunnan Province similar to other rural mountainous areas. The village livelihoods consist of traditional farming and livestock raising as the main source of food, income and economic activity. The men are responsible for the fields and heavy manual labor while women are responsible for livestock and housework. But with the development of China’s new economic development policies and the increased support for infrastructure construction in Yunnan Province, while the traditional "male" role has not fundamentally changed, the traditional division of labor has changed to a certain extent. The stronger males tend to seek employment outside the village and many families now employ outside labor.

When Xiao Shaba was transformed into Xiao Shaba New Village, combined with the local government planning and support, a new social division of labor and employment between men and women began to emerge. Firstly, the new rural building materials market next to the new village accommodated part of the surplus labor force (mainly middle-aged and older men and women). Secondly, as a result of the rezoning of the original village land during the resettlement process, most of the villagers were provided land elsewhere as compensation along with some funds for the transfer of land. Only a few villagers have arable land to engage in a small amount of farming mainly of corn and potatoes, and some raise cattle. Thirdly, due to the development of local transportation, a few women have taken up the work of transporting passengers and goods. A few women who have cash available have even bought vans for the transport business. But most of the local women work as porters in the nearby building materials market or get various jobs as paid labor. In sum, women no longer need to stay at home as they have an opportunity to find work outside. For the men, they have continued their role of seeking employment outside the village for cash income. In this respect, both men and women to some extent have an equal chance of finding jobs (see Figures 6 and 7).
c. Different incomes on gender

The different degree of social resources which men and women possess makes the difference in terms of the income they can generate. There are some reasons as follows: One, the pressure and influence of traditional concept of marriage limits the role of women to that of a housewife who takes care of the home, children and family. Two, the traditional division of labor and social arrangements between men and women mean that men are more readily accepted when they go find work outside the village, leading to inequality in employment opportunities for women. This further implies that women also get less opportunity to learn or further their skills for work outside their village. In the
traditional division of men and women, women must be responsible for housework and especially taking care of the older people and children so they often have no spare time or energy to go find and work outside. For men, they can be around the village during the busy farming season and then leave to find work outside.

Both the source and amount of income became further gender-differentiated after the government built new houses for the Xiao Shaba villagers for resettlement and also moved the original building materials market to the Xiao Shaba New Village. The government’s aim was to provide employment opportunities for the resettled villagers. Some of the villagers who have their houses located near the building materials market could rent the ground floor of their house to the market shopkeepers as a store front. A part of the income for these villagers thus comes from rentals. The rest of the non-rental houses can get a certain amount every year as housing compensation from the government. But overall, villagers’ incomes have now increased compared to previously since a lot more people can find jobs and get income outside the village. For example, the average annual income previously in the village was about 6,000 CNY (approximately 870 USD). Now in 2015, it has increased to around 10,000 CNY (approximately 1450 USD). Some families also send their children to find odd jobs to get money.

d. Women’s livelihoods and employment opportunity in the reservoir resettlement area

Xiao Shaba New Village was built based on a pilot project for new rural construction in Yunnan province as part of the government’s poverty alleviation projects. Thus this cannot be viewed only as a reservoir resettlement project, although the resettlement plans are related to the construction of the hydropower project. While the living condition of the villages has improved compared previously due to better housing and employment opportunities, there is still a difference among families and individuals. Those who can afford the time and energy to work often get more opportunities to find work in the town, while women who are not able to do so for various reasons including family and other
commitments or those who prefer a life of leisure rather than extra work, do not go seek outside employment.

Discussion

a. Social norms limit women’s employment opportunities

The traditional marriage concept is a key limiting factor that constrains women’s outside employment opportunities. When a woman gets married, she needs to move to her in-laws’ home. The newly-married women also face more pressure than men to take on the responsibilities of taking care of the home and family. After getting married, women also find their social circles get smaller as they have little time other than for taking care of their homes and families. They also find that when they were transferred from their previous living environment to a new environment with their husbands that it requires a period of time to adapt psychologically to the changes. Many newly-married women therefore often don’t wish to go out looking for a job immediately after getting married.

The influence of life concept means that for many women, it is adequate to just enjoy “living in today.” These women enjoy the comforts of family life in which they need to do nothing else but take care of their children and elders, and spend time entertaining their friends. For these women, it is a question of: “Why do I need to go outside to find a job when my husband can feed me?”

In daily life, most people have no desire or opportunity to pursue better quality life by getting more material things, but are content with getting their daily needs met. Only those who have an opportunity or desire to improve their life tend to go outside to look for work or to study. In Xiao Shaba New Village, some middle-aged women often stay at home, are also not working outside, just drinking tea or wine, chatting, playing mahjong together with their friends or neighbors, and occasionally do some handworks (but these handworks are more to with their use in the home; they do not go outside to sell). I had some interviews with local women who worked at the building material market, and got
information about the situation of themselves, their employment and daily life. The educational level attained by most of the local women, especially married or middle-aged women, are not too high, some have just completed grade school. As for the reason, most of the answers are that they don’t like to learn, while a few families can’t afford the fees of education in the past. And there is nothing to pursue more for them; what they pursue is enough for nothing more than to marry and have children.

b. Resettlement planning and women’s employment opportunities

As mentioned earlier, as part of the resettlement plans, the government agencies in Xiao Shaba Village have moved the building materials market to the new resettlement area village of Xiao Shaba to help people find employment and income. In addition, Xiao Shaba New-village is nearer Liuku Town and can take advantage of the city’s transport facilities and infrastructure.

In addition, the government agencies have also built school infrastructure such as kindergarten and elementary schools in the resettlement areas to improve their access to educational opportunities. These schools also give local women with the required qualification opportunities to find teaching jobs as well as casual labor for older women. But since there are not many of these jobs, it doesn’t provide an effective solution for women to find employment.

Conclusion and Synthesis

At present, gender equity is a serious concern in terms of employment disparities between men and women in the new resettlement. The issue of gender inequity in employment can be addressed by state employment and infrastructure policies as well as education and skills development. The development and expansion of the local economies also has a positive impact on the overall employment situation. In the resettlement areas, given the lack of farming land, the number of
people engaging in farming has declined while off-farm employment has increased.

**Solving the issue of gender equity in women's employment**

Firstly, the status quo of gender division in labor and decision-making in the family needs to be rethought so that women can have access to more knowledge and production skills. Newer skills can enhance opportunities for women and create chances for their wider participation in outside society as well as improve the status and rights of women in family and larger society.

Secondly, if women are provided more training opportunities and can travel outside to further their learning, it helps them in expanding their social and information network, and provides them an equal chance of finding employment.

Thirdly, providing specific projects for women’s development such as microfinance or women's development funds can assist women who are lacking in start-up capital and help them to set up their own business even while at home.

Lastly, the state and the village communities need to work together to develop plans, projects and policies that can improve gender sensitivity and gender awareness among governmental institutions to improve gender equity in the resettlement areas.
References


