



## Gendered practices in urban ethnic tourism in Thailand



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the gendered economy of ethnic minority souvenir vending in Thailand's urban and coastal tourist areas. Increasing numbers of the Akha minority group have migrated towards tourist hotspots to engage in urban souvenir vending. Ethnographic research shows that according to the Akha gender division of labour, souvenir production and distribution are considered women's work. Peddling on foot, female Akha souvenir vendors are at the bottom of the informal tourism economy. It is shown that urban ethnic tourism primarily reproduces gender asymmetry in the division of work and that contestations of gender roles prove to be difficult. Mobile street vending enables ethnic minority women to become breadwinners of households but simultaneously reinforces gender inequality.

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### Introduction

This paper examines the development of urban ethnic tourism in Thailand by analysing gendered socioeconomic practices of predominantly female Akha souvenir vendors. Over the last decades, increasing numbers of Akha highland ethnic minority people have moved to Bangkok and other urban tourist destinations to work as souvenir street vendors (Trupp, 2014). Street vendors are an integral part of almost every city in Asia (Bhowmik, 2005; Kusakabe, 2006; Walsh & Maneepong, 2012) but have often been neglected as a working group in tourism scholarship (Steel, 2012). Ethnic minorities as tourist service providers or as attractions have mainly been examined in village contexts and only rarely investigated in urban areas (Cohen, 1989, 2001; Diekmann & Smith, 2015; Dolezal, 2015; Ishii, 2012; Michaud, 1997; Wood, 1984; Yang, 2011). The case of Akha souvenir sellers represents a highly feminized migration and work pattern in the context of tourism, ethnicity, and the informal economy.

Ethnic tourism often takes place in or near the home villages of ethnic groups and existing studies have demonstrated that female members of the groups play an important role in economic activities including the production and distribution of handicrafts or souvenirs (Cone, 1995; Ishii, 2012; Little, 2008; Swain, 1993). Gender has received increasing attention in tourism studies (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Pérez, Morgan, & Villacé-Molinero, 2015; Hall, Swain, & Kinnaird, 2003; Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic, & Harris, 2007; Sinclair 1997; Swain, 1995; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012), but “less has been said about women as producers of handicrafts and souvenirs” (Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Timothy, 2001; Swanson & Timothy, 2012).

Our observations as well as other studies about the Akha in tourism contexts in mainland Southeast Asia (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007; Ishii, 2012; Trupp, 2017) noted that the ethnic minority souvenir business is almost entirely conducted

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by females. More than 90 percent of souvenir sellers and producers are women. The strong presence of ethnic minority women in urban Southeast Asian tourism has also been noticed in Northern Vietnam (Hanh, 2008; Truong & Hall, 2015) and Northern Laos (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007). However, these studies do not include a gender analysis of urban ethnic tourism. These observations lead to the following unanswered questions: Why is the percentage of Akha women in urban ethnic tourism particularly high? What are the underlying processes of gendered migrations and practices in the urban souvenir business? And how has migration into urban ethnic tourism been influencing and influenced by Akha gender roles and relations?

In this paper, we focus on female Akha micro ethnic entrepreneurs who work as mobile souvenir vendors in Thailand's urban tourist areas. Urban mobile souvenir vending requires hard physical labour as vendors walk long distances carrying heavy baskets of souvenirs. Akha women, more than their male counterparts, are willing to embrace the work and employ their feminine and ethnicized traits to sell. This study sheds new light on gendered practices of minority street vendors in urban ethnic tourism contexts.

This research is based on ten months of field research in different urban and coastal tourist areas in Thailand (Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Koh Samui, Phuket, Pattaya, Hua Hin) between August 2008 and December 2014. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 27 female and 6 male Akha vendors as well as forms of observation in Akha urban homes, two of their home villages, and at popular sale locations were the methods used to obtain data. With the support of a Thai research assistant one of the authors approached urban Akha communities and established rapport with informants over years of contact. Interviews were mainly conducted in Central or Northern Thai, the second language for most Akha vendors. With some of the souvenir vendors who have acquired fair English-language skills, informal conversations were conducted in a mix of Thai and English. The ages of souvenir sellers the first author of this paper talked to ranged from 20 to 61 years, though children of school age and even infants were sometimes brought along during the sales activities. The participants were of various marital statuses: single, (re)married (both migrated as couple or migrated alone), and divorced. Most Akha sellers were converted Christians or had been born into Christian families, and a few were Buddhists. However, syncretic forms of belief systems exist. All the interviewed souvenir vendors had migrated from either Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai provinces in Northern Thailand but not all of them had Thai citizenship. The vast majority of Akha vendors belong to the Akha *Uqlor* subgroup which is the largest subgroup in Thailand.

In order to understand female and male practices in urban ethnic minority tourism it is necessary to analyse social and cultural structures as well as leisure and tourism through gender lenses (Aitchison, 2005; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). In this article, we argue that the Akha gender division of labour based on the received notion of appropriate practices for women and men has led to the feminization of urban ethnic tourism. By the term 'feminization of urban ethnic tourism' we refer to disproportionately high numbers of women in Akha urban souvenir selling as well as to the gendered understanding of the 'nature' of the work. We highlight the socio-cultural processes in which practices in ethnic tourism are constructed as feminine and therefore draw women into this informal economic activity. Akha men, on the other hand, are often reluctant to participate in urban souvenir production and sales. As tourism income has become more important for Akha households, Akha men have started to work in the souvenir business but our ethnographic data demonstrate that certain aspects of traditional gender roles and hierarchy persist.

The following section will review debates on gender and tourism and highlight our contribution to the marginalized but growing academic field of gender and tourism research.

## Gender and tourism

This study is informed by the debates on gender and tourism, particularly the relationships between ethnic minority women and the tourism economy. The domination of women in tourism employment can be explained by the gender division of labour – the notion that social constructions of distinctive male and female qualities designate what women and men's work should be inside the household and in the workforce (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Sinclair, 1997; Tucker, 2007). Differentiated and unequal social values attached to women's and men's work create a hierarchy in which women's work is regarded lowly and paid less in the job market. This results in women's employment in low-wage jobs, more unpaid work within the household, and continuing dependence upon their husbands (Pritchard et al., 2007; Tucker, 2007; UNWTO, 2011; Walby, 1997). The occupational gendered hierarchy is a product of patriarchal capitalism that marginalizes women when they join men in the labour force (Adkins, 2004; Gu, 2012).

Women's jobs in tourism mirror the traditional role of women in the household (Bauer & McKercher, 2003; Cabezas, 2009; Timothy, 2001). Most studies on tourism and women's employment pay attention to the way in which various jobs in the tourism business, e.g. in the airline business, the food and restaurant industry, or destination promotion in general (Momsen, 2010; Sinclair, 1997; Van Esterik, 2000; Veijola & Valtonen, 2007) require feminine traits and skills and demand employees to embody such characteristics.

Gender differences, the gender division of labour, and its underlying inequalities are 'naturalized' and taken for granted through everyday bodily practices that have been repeated over time. According to Judith Butler (2011, p. 191), (heteronormative) gender identities are not natural but constituted in time through a 'stylized repetition of acts'. She posits that we perform ourselves into male and female beings in accordance with existing social scripts. In a similar vein, Bourdieu (2001, p. 30) explains male/female opposition as "two different classes of habitus" which we inhabit according to our embodied dis-

position acquired through past social experience, especially during early years of life (Bourdieu, 1977; Jenkins, 2002; Wacquant, 2011). As a “powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces and legitimates choices” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 147), socialized gender predisposition significantly influences everyday practices. Because gender identities, norms, roles, and division of labour have been solidified through repeated bodily acts over time, changes are slow and difficult.

In Thai urban ethnic tourism, we find that gender hierarchy intersects with class, ethnicity, and rural-urban hierarchy to place double marginalized groups such as Akha ethnic minority women in the lowest strata of the tourism industry echelon. The place of the socially or economically marginalized population in the lower end of the tourism economy is also noted by other scholars (Malam, 2008; Burns & Novelli, 2011; Law, 2012). Fagertun (2016) points out that while urban elite fill white-collar positions in international hotel chains, airlines and travel companies in Bali tourism industry, low-caste women and men try to improve their lives through self-employment in the informal tourism sector. She finds that for this group social mobility is uncertain, especially for lower-caste married women who do not own properties in patrilineal Balinese society. In a study on Miao ethnic minority workers in the informal tourism sector in rural China, Feng (2013) analyses the dynamics of gender roles under the transition from a subsistence to a cash economy. Results show that Miao women predominantly occupy the low end of tourist-related jobs such as mobile souvenir vending or hawking while the Miao men work in more stable and secure occupations such as driver, sightseeing boatmen or family business owners.

The impacts of ethnic tourism on the status of ethnic minority women are ambiguous. Some scholars argue that ethnic tourism in Asia can advance the economic status of ethnic minority women (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007; Phommavong & Sörensson, 2014; Tran & Walter, 2014). However, economic mobility does not necessarily translate into changes in gender norms in the wider society. Studies conducted in the Global South about female producers and distributors of ethnic tourist art showed that the handicraft producers gained greater power within the household, but not within the wider society where prevailing gender norms could not be changed (Cone, 1995; Feng, 2013; Swain, 1993; Timothy, 2001). Working in informal or community-based tourism businesses, women still have to be responsible for household reproductive duties and the flexibility to combine the two sometimes results in double work for women (Feng, 2013; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). The relationship between tourism work and women’s empowerment has been complicated. Women’s empowerment need to be considered in the context of family relations in specific cultural settings (Ferguson & Alarcón, 2015; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012) while the possibility for social mobility in tourism is shaped by the intersection of gender with other axes of power such as caste, class, and ethnicity (Fagertun, 2016; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Ypeij, 2012). Economic participation alone does not straightforwardly attest to high status of women. The literature on women’s status in Southeast Asia has shown that women have long been active in the economic realm and enjoy relative power within the household but they are still marginalized in the public realm where men dominate the religious and political arenas (King, 2008; Muecke, 1984; Singhanetra-Renard & Prabhudhanitisarn, 1992; Van Esterik, 1996).

Before further discussing the findings of this study, it is necessary to ground the feminized economy of urban Akha souvenir vending in its contemporary social, cultural and historical context. In the following, we describe the Akha’s position in Thai society and explain their involvement in urban ethnic tourism.

### **Akha’s place in Thai society and urban ethnic tourism**

#### *The Akha*

The Akha are a Tibeto-Burmese speaking ethnic minority group who are today scattered across Yunnan province in South-western China, Eastern Burma, and the northern parts of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. In Thailand, the Akha have moved in and settled in Northern provinces more than 100 years ago (Alting von Geusau, 1983, p. 246). Despite their long presence in Thailand, the Akha and other highland ethnic minority groups are considered non-Thai by the Thai authorities and mainstream society following the popular nationalist discourse that associates Thainess with the Thai language, Buddhism, and loyalty to the monarchy (Bhrukasri, 1989; Kammerer, 1989; Keyes, 1997; Vaddhanaphuti, 2005; Winichakul, 1994). Ethnic minority people in Southeast Asia in general and in Thailand in particular have been ascribed multiple layers of marginality; geographically they live in remote hill regions or sensitive borderlands, politically they lack citizenship and are excluded from mainstream political participation, culturally and socially they are regarded as the ‘backward others’ by the mainstream society, and economic-environmentally they have distinct livelihoods and agricultural methods (McCaskill, Leepreecha, & Shaoying, 2008; McKinnon & Vienne, 1989; Rigg, 1997). Recent studies assume that 40–60 percent of ethnic minorities in Thailand have a legitimate claim to Thai citizenship but remain without it (Toyota, 2006, p. 1). Lacking citizenship, ethnic minorities in Thailand are forbidden to leave their province, vote, work legally, or own land; they are also excluded from the social security and health care systems and have no access to higher education.

Akha gender roles and family relations are described in Akhazang “which has been translated as ‘religion, way of life, customs, etiquette, and ceremonies’, and ‘traditions as handed over by the fathers’” (Alting von Geusau, 1983, p. 249). The “Akha kinship system features named patrilineal with exogamous unnamed sub-lineages, paternal authority in the household, and a meticulous sexual division of labor” (Hanks, 1988, p. 15). Generally, Akha men see the village and the world outside while women remain in the household (Hanks, 1988, p. 17) and spin cotton, sew and weave (Choopah & Naess, 1997, p. 191) but many of their divided activities in the house and labour have to be seen as complementary (Kammerer, 1986, p. 357). For

example, the cultivation of rice and the work on the fields is carried out by both genders, although women's contributions are normally higher; rice pounding and preparation are clearly defined as women's work (Hanks, 1988; Kammerer, 1988). Gender asymmetry also becomes evident in the distribution of important leadership and socio-political roles (Kammerer, 1986, p. 356), and it is also the male household head who decides if a household moves into or out of a particular village (Tooker, 1996, p. 337). Most of the literature on Akha gender roles also agrees that Akha women can exercise a certain degree of power, but are subordinate to men. "Not only do men have the power to influence the lives of women; so also women have the power to influence the lives of men. But I would argue in this, men and women are not equal" (Kammerer, 1988, p. 49).

Over the last decades the Akha in Thailand have experienced rapid economic and sociocultural changes. A deteriorating economic situation due to the loss of land and forest as well as a disruption of social, political, and cultural structures in the villages due to the implementation of the Thai administrative-bureaucratic system and Christian missionary activities have been observed and documented (Kammerer, 1990; Tooker, 2004). Kammerer (1988) speculated that these changes will impact gender relations by favouring or further enhancing the position of men (pp. 50–51). The migration of Akha into urban tourist areas (Trupp, 2015b) is one consequence of these transformations and represents an arena where gender roles can be re-negotiated.

The migration of the Akha into lowland urban tourist areas is part of a larger socioeconomic transition in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular have experienced rapid urbanization. Between 1961 and 2011 Southeast Asia's urban population increased from 18.7% to 42.4% (FAOSTAT, 2013). Thailand's urban population accounts for 59.7% in 2011. The restructuring of the Thai economy since the 1960s and onward have made it impossible to sustain a living solely on agriculture, which is why (circular) migration to the capital city Bangkok and other economic areas has become a necessity for people from the north- and northeastern provinces, regardless of their ethnic background (Rigg, 1997; Rigg & Salamanca, 2011). In addition, various factors including quests for higher education and the search for non-agricultural jobs which are rarely available in rural areas, the temptations of an urban and more modern lifestyle, and the opening of trade routes between Thailand and its neighbouring countries, have further accelerated urban-directed migration. In addition, the migration of highland populations in particular is further propelled due to loss of land (rights), destruction of social and political village structures, and non-conformation to village regulations regarding drug addiction or sociocultural rules (Buadaeng, Boonyasaranai, & Leepreecha, 2002; Toyota, 1998; Trupp, 2017).

#### *Gendered Akha mobilities: Tourism promotion and migration*

In tourism contexts the Akha are heavily promoted as the exotic other and a major tourist attraction. Especially images of Akha women wearing black mini-skirts, colourful embroidered shirts and an impressive looking headgear originally consisting of various materials such as beaten silver, silver coins, beads, and feathered tassels (Lewis & Lewis, 1984, pp. 208–217) have been frequently used for tourism promotion. Akha women are prominently featured in tourist media, advertisements, and postcards (Cohen, 1992; Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007; Toyota, 1993) and have become one of the most visible highland ethnic minority groups. The Akha in Thailand are thus placed in a position where on the one hand, they have experienced political-economic marginalization and social disdain, and on the other, they are heavily publicized as a tourist attraction by the travel industry.

Socioeconomic and political changes in the highland areas have fostered an urban-directed migration of ethnic minorities which has shown highly gendered patterns of work and mobilities from the beginning on. Early research carried out by Vatikiotis (1984) notes that women dominated the Akha population in urban Chiang Mai by two to one (p. 122). During the 1970s and 1980s, Akha marriage customs fostered the urban migration of Akha women to avoid unwanted marriages (Toyota, 1998, pp. 204–205). The traditional patrilineal kinship structure that leaves women vulnerable to divorce (Tooker, 2012, p. 153; Toyota, 1998, p. 205) contributes to women's outward migration. Also, the rise of opium and heroin addiction among Akha men in the 1980s and 1990s is a likely factor for women's ex-village movements (Rutherford, Jantian, & Nethngam, 2007, p. 57). In addition, opportunities for education in the cities facilitate an increasing urban-directed migration of highland minorities (Buadaeng et al., 2002, p. 4). The Buddhist educational scholarship and schooling program *tham-macarik* targeted ethnic minority boys by providing free accommodation, food and Thai education in urban centres (Keyes, 1971, p. 562; Toyota 1998, p. 207). Montreevat and Ponsakunpaisan (1997, pp. 290–291) argue that many young ethnic minority women were left inexperienced and uneducated resulting in a high percentage of these women working in the sex industry (Buadaeng et al., 2002; Choopah & Naess, 1997, p. 193, pp. 7–9). This way, self-employment as souvenir seller can offer an alternative to sex work.

A women-dominated migration pattern of the Akha corresponds to the data of the Thai population census, which shows that women have outstripped men in urban-directed migration since 1980 (Osaki, 1999, p. 449). Generally, in the Thai context, market women have long played an important role in household economies. Muecke (1984, p. 464) points out that Thai women traditionally were responsible for petty trade but their "economic control was managerial, with the household rather than the individual as the basic economic unit, and that women carried the responsibility to make ends meet". This role has in turn encouraged female migration for the purpose of seeking employment and financially supporting 'left-behind' families (Chamrathirong, 2007; Mills, 1997; Singhanetra-Renard & Prabhudhanitisarn, 1992). However, as outlined above, Akha social structures traditionally featured different gender roles. Akha female's work was mainly bound to the home and the work in agricultural fields (Toyota, 1998). Nowadays, under different socioeconomic conditions in both Thailand's high-

and lowlands, Akha migrants such as the mobile souvenir vendors of this study have become breadwinners of the household by sending back remittances to children, parents, and husbands left behind. Female labour force participation in Thailand is high and nowadays related to the late age of marriage, higher numbers of unmarried or divorced women and low fertility rates (Yasmeen & Nirathron, 2014, p. 4).

Since the 1970s, groups of Akha have moved to low-land cities in the northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai to engage in souvenir selling. The migration of Akha souvenir vendors has since expanded and from the 1990s onward Akha vendors have ventured towards tourist sites in Bangkok and beach resort destinations including Phuket, Koh Samui, and Pattaya (Trupp, 2015b, 2017).

The reasons for interviewed Akha women to migrate into Thailand's urban tourist areas are mainly economic. Faced by limited opportunities in their homeland, the women often cited the desire to generate or diversify income as their main motivations for migration.

“If we have enough money or something to do to survive we will not come to Bangkok. But in our village there is nothing to do. We are not allowed to make plantations in our village. No forest for us anymore” (Interview with Akha seller in Bangkok).

Even though economic pressure seems predominant at first sight, non-economic factors have been shown to be important as well. These include negative experiences in previous employment that drove Akha women to look for independent work, the possibility to live a life together with a partner, the chance to escape from the past, and eventually the desire to experience something new.

“The reason why I decided to go to Koh Samui is that I did not want to live in the same area as in the past which reminds me of my past story. I want to forget everything”. (Interview with Akha seller, Koh Samui)

### **Feminized and informal economy of Akha mobile souvenir business**

Processes in the urban Akha souvenir business, from production to distribution, are highly gendered. This tourism micro enterprise is feminized both in terms of number (disproportionally high number of women) and the ‘nature’ of the work. Making and selling souvenirs are considered women's work. More than 90 percent of souvenir sellers and producers are women. Souvenirs offered range from self-made products such as bags, hats or wristbands to mass-manufactured items such as wooden frogs, bracelets, wallets or necklaces which are mainly imported from China or Myanmar. The majority of these souvenirs do not reflect traditional Akha designs or symbolism.

#### *Souvenir production as women's work*

The production of Akha souvenirs such as wristbands, bags or headgears requires at least some basic skills in sewing, stitching or embroidery, traditionally Akha women's skills and cultural capital that Akha girls are socialized to embody from a young age (Alting von Geusau, 2000, p. 145; Choopah & Naess, 1997, p. 191). Conventionally, Akha men do not get involved in the task of weaving or sewing except in extraordinary occasions such as in ritualistic punishment and a rite of restoration (Hanks, 1988, p. 19–20).

The Akha gender division of labour associates souvenir business with women's work. As income from tourism has become important to Akha families' livelihoods, some younger Akha men have started to engage in ‘typical women work’ by learning from their wives how to sew and embroider. Men who contest gender roles and take up women's work are ridiculed by their fellow Akha villagers. One male Akha souvenir seller (and producer) recounted the reactions of male villagers when he was observed producing souvenirs back home in the village: “Some asked questions like: are you a ladyboy now?” (Informal conversation with male Akha seller, Bangkok). Teasing from fellow villagers indicates that socio-economic success achieved by means of ‘female-connoted’ work does not necessarily enhance the social status of Akha men in the home villages.

#### *Selling types and gender hierarchy*

Although a few men have started to take part in urban souvenir street vending, gender hierarchy is manifested in different types of selling for male and female vendors. Women occupy the lowest rung of street vending – mobile selling – while men and couples are more likely to sell at fixed or semi-mobile premises (for a categorisation of vending styles, see Gantner, 2011; Nirathron, 2006; Smith & Henderson, 2008)

The few men involved in the urban souvenir business mainly do not work as mobile sellers like their female counterparts, but work as semi-mobile or permanent vendors from stalls or from footpaths. Furthermore, it has been observed that an Akha man accumulated a stock of souvenirs in his rented home in Bangkok and became a local distributor to women who had run out of their own goods. Semi-mobile Akha vendors use easily transportable mats or small tables to display their products on footpaths, streets, squares or stairs in front of buildings. The gender ratio of this type of seller is relatively equal, while it was observed that migrant couples often split into a female mobile vendor and a male semi-mobile seller. Most of these vendors remain at their sales sites throughout the day/evening or even throughout days and months. The category of

fixed vending styles comprises souvenir stalls or shops that are set up permanently or regularly at one specific site, and is mainly occupied by male vendors and Akha couples. These businesses can be found in tourist zones, including night markets and several day markets, which are especially popular in Chiang Mai. These spaces for stalls or small shops have to be officially rented or owned, thus forms of economic and social capital are necessary in order to run this type of business. Depending on the location, monthly tenure can cost up to 20,000 Baht. Moreover, stalls at popular markets are limited and usually fully booked and thus not accessible to newcomers unless they can take over the stall contract from someone they know. People occupying fixed stalls or shops can be owners, lessees or sublessees while rental terms might be negotiated on a yearly, monthly or daily basis with costs varying greatly depending on the business' features and location (Fuengfusakul, 2008, p. 111).

Akha women are more likely to occupy the entry level of souvenir street vending. Compared to the other vending types, mobile vending faces the lowest business entry barriers as no extra money for a fixed stall or market fees are required. The disadvantage, however, is that mobile vending requires hard physical work and exposes vendors to higher risks of getting fined. More importantly, economic return is modest and opportunities for career advancement are very limited for this type of vending. Many female mobile vendors state that they would prefer to have their own shop or permanent stall, but cannot afford it. Lack of economic resources (to pay for a fixed premise and a larger stock of souvenirs) and lack of social capital (knowing the right people at the market place) blocks them from further advancing their business.

Of all vending styles, mobile vending is the most labour intensive. Mobile Akha souvenir sellers do not have fixed premises, but carry their products (mainly in baskets) and walk through streets in tourist zones. In terms of absolute numbers, this is the biggest group accounting for a few hundred Akha souvenir sellers across Thailand. With very few exceptions across the country, the group of mobile sellers is entirely female. In Chiang Mai, we could not see a single male mobile seller, which is consistent with Ishii's (2010) observations of Akha souvenir vendors at Chiang Mai night bazaar (p. 115). There is a very small number of male Akha mobile sellers in Bangkok and the beachside destinations.

Compared to fixed stalls and semi-mobile premises, mobile vendors work longer hours. Carrying heavy baskets full of souvenirs, female Akha mobile vendors roam the streets and footpaths along markets and tourist zones walking several kilometres each day. Depending on the location, they start selling and thus walking from midday or early evening until midnight. In the capital city Bangkok mobile vendors usually walk along and around the back – and flashparker enclave of Khaosan Road, the Silom area – which generally caters to upmarket tourists but also features a busy night market and a redlight district – and the lower Sukhumvit area. The latter route passes the red-light zone of Nana Plaza, the Middle Eastern tourist enclave around Soi three, and continues along both sides of the Sukhumvit main road below one of Bangkok's BTS skytrain lines, extending approximately two kilometres. Walking such loops with a heavy souvenir basket several times per day, some mobile vendors cover daily distances of 20 kilometres or more. For this group, walking as an everyday mobile practice involves walking to and from work as well as walking as work (Lorimer, 2011; Trupp, 2015a).

Female Akha vendors described their work as “exhausting” and “tiresome”. Akha mobile sellers cater the same or similar products (e.g. wooden frogs or wristbands) as those displayed in semi-mobile or fixed stalls, but move on foot to approach tourists individually. They work longer hours than most shops or fixed stalls sellers, peddling until midnight or even later. Akha mobile vendors compete with and try to outperform each other by working even longer than other vendors, or by not returning home to their village for Christmas or during school holidays, when the majority of other sellers do. Furthermore, Akha micro-entrepreneurs accept harsh working environments in busy, crowded, partly polluted tourist centres where they frequently have to deal with drunken customers. The monthly income of mobile vendors depends on many factors, but in Bangkok it usually varies between 8000 and 20,000 Baht. There are no licenses for Akha mobile sellers and the regulations and law enforcement remains ambiguous (Trupp, 2015a). Most of the main vending areas are characterized by controls or fines and bribes executed by municipal inspectors. Akha vendors may have to pay monthly bribes ranging from 100 to 1000 Baht. When a vendor gets caught by the authority, the income for the day is sometimes spent on the fine as one female vendor recounted:

“If they catch me and I have to pay 500 Baht, then I have no more money for food”. (Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok)

Female Akha souvenir vendors occasionally experience conflicts with foreign customers over the sales of products or even incidents of sexual harassment. When in trouble with foreign customers, Akha vendors are reluctant to turn to state authorities for help because of the officials' tendency to support or believe tourists rather than ‘hilltribe people’.

*‘Men cannot sell as we do’*

Female Akha sellers explain this gender divide in urban souvenir business where women take up the most physically challenged vending style in the following way: “Men just cannot sell as we do”, “men are too shy”, and one Akha woman mentioned that Akha men are too lazy (Interviews with female Akha vendors, Bangkok; field notes, Bangkok, Koh Samui). Female mobile sellers state that semi-mobile or permanent vending seems more comfortable and probably economically more beneficial, but sympathize with Akha men who are just not able to carry out mobile vending.

In the women's logic, it is Akha men's ‘natural’ shyness that hinders them from approaching Western tourists and becoming successful mobile sellers. In fact, the first female Akha sellers in Chiang Mai and Bangkok were also too shy to approach tourists, and so too the female students who come to join their mothers during the holidays as well as many other newcom-

ers who do not have any sales experience. Yet, many of the women have entered the mobile souvenir business. It seems to be taken for granted that Akha men are unable to sell like women, and neither male nor female sellers openly dispute this.

“My husband is working in the same area and we are taking care of each other. Some other couples stay together in Bangkok and help each other to run the business but mainly the husbands of the female sellers live in their village. They have to take care of their family or farms or pets or rice field. They prefer to stay there much more than in Bangkok and they think this job does not suit to them as it does to females”. (Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok)

“I think they [male Akha semimobile sellers] can earn much more than me because they can display their stuff on mats. So they can show more products than I do. [...] And I know that they are too shy to carry a basket like females”. (Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok)

The supposed ‘shyness’ is how the Akha female vendors explain the feeling of Akha men associated to the practice of urban mobile souvenir vending. Akha men who also worked as souvenir seller or producer stated that they experienced teasing by fellow Akha men when carrying out such female connoted work. Such dispositions can be interpreted as notions of shame. Akha men feel ashamed to carry out the low-status work of souvenir vending and production. First, souvenir making and selling are considered women’s work and it can be considered as disgrace for men to take part in feminine constructed practices. Second, souvenir peddling by ethnic minorities in urban areas is sometimes thought to be akin to begging and Akha villagers who have better options would not choose to do it. Owning permanent stores or semi-mobile premises would be more desirable than peddling. Akha men would rather opt for other working arrangements, including letting their female family members migrate to become urban mobile vendors while they remain in the village to look after the farm and the household. Having limited choices, Akha women venture into the lowest job in the tourism economic echelon in informal urban spaces where hilltribe minorities are looked down upon by members of the Thai mainstream society.

Personality, physical appearance and ‘feminine’ connoted skills of building a connection with customers are an important part of tourism service work that involves face to face encounters between service providers and customers (Veijola & Jokinen, 2008). These qualities are constructed as feminine in many, though not all, cultures whether they are performed and embodied by men or women (Veijola & Jokinen, 2008; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). The feminine nature of the work, as constructed and perceived in the eyes of Akha vendors and their foreign customers, makes Akha women better sellers than their male counterparts. Among female vendors, the more successful ones are those who are ‘charming’—friendly and skillful in making conversation with prospective customers. Women are deemed more suitable for what tourism service work—including mobile souvenir vending—requires. It is thus the notion of the “managed heart” (Hochschild, 2012) representing the stereotype which sees women as particularly suitable for working in the tourism service industry. Previous ethnographic studies of the Akha noted Akha women’s ‘easy going’ personality that might have contributed to Akha women’s relative ease with urban mobile vending. Kammerer (1986) notes that Akha women – unlike Thai women – are traditionally less reserved with their body in public spaces. Dutch anthropologist Alting von Geusau (1983, p. 272) further stated that the Akha “show remarkable friendliness to outsiders coming in, and have developed a capacity to make even known bandits or hard-line administrators feel at ease”.

Another related explanation for the gendered division of sales practices is linked to the existing images of the exoticized and feminized ‘Other’ and to the pre-formed tourist gaze (Urry, 2002; Mackie, 2000). Female Akha vendors represent charming, nonthreatening and approachable exotic others. Ishii (2012) argues that it is difficult for male Akha to find a job in ethnic tourism, as this field of occupation mainly requires women and children for the sake of exoticism and eroticism (p. 306). Tourist promotional materials about the hilltribes in general and the Akha in particular mainly depict women and girls (Ishii, 2010, p. 117). In a study of representation of highlanders on picture postcards in Northern Thailand, Mostafanezhad (2014) finds that women (and children) are key signifiers of the ethnic and feminine other. This is also due to the fact that the Akha women’s traditional dress and silver headgear is more attractive to tourists than the men’s costume. Two Akha men told one of the authors that they tried to sell the same products as the female mobile sellers, but they were not able to sell anything. So they changed their products (to accessories and fake tattoos) and became more successful.

#### *Division of labour in the households of female Akha vendors*

When women migrate to work in urban tourist areas, Akha men take care of the house, the rice fields, and family members left behind. With their income from souvenir vending, women predominantly support their household back home by paying for their children’s education and saving up for a new house construction or the acquisition of a motorbike or a car. However, gender division of labour within the household is not completely changed by women’s income earning ability. On two occasions when one of the authors accepted Akha female’s vendors’ invitation to visit their home villages, he noted that migrant women resumed reproductive work in the household such as preparing food and cleaning the dishes and worked on producing souvenirs in the late evenings after they were free from household chores. This gender division of labour is similar in the households of Akha migrant couples in tourist areas where the wife cooked, served food, and cleaned the dishes. Our case study reaffirms earlier research that shows that women’s involvement in tourism economic activities have both challenged and reproduced traditional gender relations and division of labour both within the household and in wider society (Bourdieu, 2001; Ishii, 2012; Swain, 1993; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012).

## Discussion

Akha women predominantly continue to do women's work and inhabit expected ethnic women's femininity in urban ethnic tourism. With a few exceptions, this gender-related division of work is hardly questioned within the Akha communities. Both Akha men and women perceive souvenir producing and selling as women's work that is not suitable for men. The division of gender-related work in this context "appears to be 'in the order of things', as people sometimes refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 8). The perceived natural gender predisposition legitimates inequality in Akha urban souvenir business. Among the different vending styles, the hardest work—mobile vending—is carried out by women. Akha men's alleged inability or unwillingness to peddle is explained by their natural 'shyness' that make them, supposedly, unfit for the job.

Changes in gender relations as a result of migration and women's economic contribution to the household are not easily accepted by all. When a few Akha men in urban tourist centres outside of Chiang Mai started to contest existing gender habitus by engaging in female connoted souvenir production and distribution processes, they were teased by fellow villagers back home in the village and their urban economic activity did not gain them social respect. In many instances, Akha migrants still recognize the status of men as the master and paternal authority of the household. Decisions about migration are discussed by couples together, but 'smaller decisions' in urban contexts often need the male partner's agreement. For example, once, a Thai movie team was looking for background artists for a half-day film shooting and an Akha seller called her husband in the village to ask for his permission to participate. Also when asked to participate in semi-structured interviews for this study, a number of the Akha urban mobile vendors were not allowed to be interviewed without the attendance of their husbands. Although mobile souvenir selling economically sustains their own life and in many cases supports the life of left-behind family members in the highlands, to suggest that they are fully empowered would be a misleading conclusion. Certainly, masculine domination is, to an extent, challenged by the gender division of household earnings in which women are now the main household income providers, but cultural ideology reproduces social gender inequality (Bourdieu, 2001; Ishii, 2012; Swain, 1993).

Structural transformation of the Thai economy and socioeconomic and cultural changes in the highland areas (Rigg, 1997; Tooker, 2004) have contributed to Akha women's migration to tourist areas in search of a livelihood opportunity. Urban-directed migration of Akha women is driven – to a large extent – by limited opportunities and prospects in their home villages. Mobile vendors make up the very bottom of a business niche in tourism which Akha women have entered because it is one of a few available options to them. The informal sector of the tourism economy – in which street vending activities predominantly take place – has been associated with labour-intensive production, simple technology, bad payment, low formal education requirement, low grade of organization, lack of social security systems, and non-registered/partly illegal economic activities (Portes, Castells, & Benton 1989). Street vending in Asia usually takes place in a context of high competition, high risk and insecurity and often entails conflict with authorities (Bhowmik, 2005; Endres, 2013; Batréau & Bonnet, 2016). In South and Southeast Asia, relocations and evictions of street vendors are a common practice (Walsh & Maneepong, 2012, p. 256), especially in the context of new and 'modern' infrastructure projects or under the official concerns of health and hygiene. In the informal tourism sector, the intersection of gender with class, ethnicity, and an informal status in the economy contributes to experiences of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991; Moore, 1993; Fagertun, 2016).

Urban souvenir business provides income for Akha families when they do not have many other livelihood options but it is not what the Akha consider an ideal job. Most Akha men are more willing to remain in the village and embrace part of women's reproductive work in the family than moving into the female dominated urban souvenir business. Most interviewed Akha women vendors would prefer to live in the village (as most of their husbands do) and plan to return permanently as soon as they accumulate enough savings.

## Conclusion

This article examined gendered mobilities and practices of Akha highland ethnic minority groups in the souvenir business in Thailand's urban tourist zones. Like ethnic tourism in villages, small-scale Akha souvenir entrepreneurship in urban tourist districts is highly feminized. Both interviewed male and female Akha view the production and distribution of souvenirs predominantly as women's work. The case of urban souvenir vending widely re-affirms and partially challenges Akha gender roles. With a few exceptions, this gender-related division of work is hardly questioned within the Akha vendors' group.

Akha women's migration and participation in tourism has reconstructed gender inequality but it has also advanced their economic status as breadwinners of the household and opened up new horizons. Different from patriarchal systems in other sociocultural contexts (e.g. in Middle Eastern contexts) where women's work and spatial mobility is often bound to household tasks (Tucker, 2007), Akha women's strong participation in the production and distribution of souvenirs means that they enter new social and economic settings outside the classical village or domestic spheres. This enables them to forge and mobilize relations with outsiders, predominantly international tourists, but also members of Thai mainstream society (Trupp, 2017). These results differ from Bhowmik's (2005) study on female street vendors in urban India where women traders, due to family duties, cannot afford as much time for their selling-work as male vendors and where women remain rather invisible and where they are harassed by their male counterparts (2005, pp. 2262–2263). Yet, Akha women's increased participation in self-employment does not necessarily empower them but perpetuates their marginalized position

under transforming socioeconomic conditions. In a similar vein, Ishii (2012) showed that ethnic minority producers and vendors in Northern Thailand accumulate a certain degree of economic status but predominantly continue to conform to prevalent gender roles within their own society.

Research on gender and tourism among ethnic minorities in China showed that men enjoyed greater access to income generation activities than women; better earning jobs were 'reserved' for males as they were perceived 'too hard' for women (Feng, 2013). Conversely, in the ethnic minority context of Thailand, female vendors carry out the physically and emotionally hardest job, work that is perceived and constructed as unsuitable for men. Mobile vending is labour intensive and risky due to its informal character (Nirathron, 2006; Walsh & Maneepong, 2012). This way, female vendors pursue a type of a self-exploitation strategy involving long working hours and difficult working conditions in order to succeed economically. Their income is still higher than poorly paid wage labour, but bigger savings for future investments or entrepreneurial advancements in the sense of upgrading their business (e.g. from a mobile to a fixed stand) is hardly possible.

Debates among scholars over whether the female domination of street vending and micro businesses in Thailand and Southeast Asia are indicating high or low status of women (Keyes, 1984; Yasmeen & Nirathron, 2014) remain unsolved. The majority of street vendors in Thailand come from the marginalized regions in the North- and Northeast of the country or from neighbouring Myanmar. Akha female vendors constitute the very bottom of a business niche in urban ethnic tourism that nevertheless makes them breadwinners of households and simultaneously reinforces cultural gender norms and inequality. Further research is necessary in order to analyse how tourism-induced migration transforms gender relations in highland minority villages and how left-behind husbands perceive or construct women's work in urban areas.

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