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Aid, education and adventure:  
Thai women's participation in  
a development scholarship  
scheme.

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Aid, education and adventure: Thai women's participation in a development scholarship scheme.

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## **Abstract**

Development scholarships – endowments that provide individuals from so-called ‘developing’ nations with opportunities to undertake tertiary training abroad – are an historically important, yet increasingly contested, form of educational aid. However, meaningful debates about the value of this type of aid are limited by a lack of research about the impact that it has. The experience of female development scholars is a particularly neglected area of research. This article provides a qualitative exploration of the experiences of twelve Thai women who have completed a postgraduate degree through a scholarship scheme funded by the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). This research highlights a number of benefits associated with these schemes, including greater emotional autonomy, increased cross-cultural knowledge, new professional networks, new work skills, and improved English-language competency. Negative outcomes identified include career disruption, new unwanted work responsibilities, and dissatisfaction with aspects of life in their country of origin.

*Key words: development, women, scholarships, international students, Thailand.*

## **Biographical Note**

**Kirsty Wild** is a New Zealand researcher who is interested in how we move towards societies that are fairer and more sustainable. She is involved in a number of community conservation projects, and she lives in Northland with her son, Arlo.

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## **Education abroad and the 'scholarship girl': An introduction**

International education scholarships have traditionally been the centre of an important 'diaspora of hope' (Appadurai 1996) for many men and women from countries with poorly-funded, low-quality tertiary education systems. The image of the local scholar educated abroad has come to play an important role in the educational imaginary of both host and recipient countries. It has functioned as a touchstone around which we have come to understand and play out notions of educational 'progress' and development obligation. Until recently these images of progress have been overwhelmingly male. Ivor Goodson and Pat Sikes (2001) argue that the story of the 'scholarship boy' functioned as a central trope within mid-twentieth-century Western critiques of class inequality. They assert that stories about both local working-class boys made good, as well as colonial scholars, while now devalued as 'reminiscent of outmoded models of meritocracies, masculinities, and Marxisms', occupied a central role within the utopian optimism prevalent in the post-WWII era (Goodson & Sikes 2001:78).

Images of the 'scholarship girl' have not been so easy to come by, in part because traditional gender roles have historically prevented women from taking up these sorts of opportunities. It is also because, even where women have managed to access higher education, the sexist bias within education research has often rendered such experiences less worthy of academic attention. Since the 1970s, feminist education writers have sought to redress this imbalance; however such efforts have only been partially successful. Writing on the impact of higher education on the professional identities and career trajectories of women still remains dominated by a concern with the experiences of Western women (Bhalalusesa 1998; Morley 2005; Richie, et al., 1997). Where feminist education research has considered the experiences of women from non-Western nations, it has tended to focus on quantitative measures of educational outcomes, such as rates of enrolment, levels of attainment, and labour force participation rates (Biraimah 1997; Morley 2005; Robinson-Pant 2004).

Research on the lives of 'international students' has also traditionally displayed a strong male bias (Kenway & Bullen 2003; Wright 1997). Gender was absent as a category of analysis within most early studies, where the student was assumed to be male, and women were assigned the status of 'wives' of scholars (Goldsmith & Shawcross 1985; Kenway & Bullen 2003; Wright 1997). While the more recent work of authors such as Caroline Wright (1997) and others (for example, Davis & Dodds 1993; Kenway & Bullen 2003; Leonard 1998) provides evidence of a shift towards greater gender awareness within the international student literature, this area of research is still very small. Research on the lives of female international students has also lacked an empirical depth, offering 'a synthesis of existing secondary materials and "Western" feminist theories' (Kenway & Bullen 2003:7).

The international student literature has also been dominated by a largely negative concern with psychological 'adjustment' and 'culture shock' (James, et al. 2004; Kenway & Bullen 2003; Rohrllich & Martin 1991). Explorations of the positive or productive dimensions of the sojourn experience are rare (Kenway & Langmead 1999; Lackland Sam 2000; Marks 1987), as are any serious considerations of the long-term impact of study abroad. Sarah

Brabant et al. (1990) argue that the dearth of literature on long-term dimensions of international educational experience is in large part due to the practical difficulties researchers have tracking down students when they return home. However, this absence is also likely to be due to the fact that the field has been dominated by psychology researchers concerned with individual adjustment and mental health.

Finally, ‘tracer’ studies of returnees conducted by aid agencies have been dominated by a ‘human capital’ development perspective that has been almost exclusively concerned with documenting the acquisition of new employment skills. These primarily quantitative studies have largely ignored the impact of the scholarship experience on personal and family life, as well as the contribution that ‘extra-curricular’ aspects of the experience (such as cross-cultural knowledge, new friendships, greater confidence and autonomy) make to the outcomes associated with this type of educational aid.

This article seeks to expand our understanding of the impact of the development scholarship experience on women’s lives by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of the experiences of twelve women from Thailand who have returned home within the last seven years after participating in the New Zealand Development Scholarship Scheme, a postgraduate scheme funded by the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). NZAID list the primary objective of this scheme as ‘poverty reduction’ through helping to meet the ‘human resource training needs of ... developing countries’. Recipients who take up the awards do so on the condition that they understand that the scheme ‘place[s] national development needs ahead of the professional development needs of individual awardees’ (NZAID 2008:4). This article examines some of the medium-term outcomes associated with this scheme and provides rich narrative material that counters the historical tendency of female development scholars to be excluded from debates about the impact and future of this type of educational aid.

## **Thai women share their experiences**

Thai academic, Sinith Sittirak (1998) opens her book *The Daughters of Development* with an interesting aside on the ways that, as a professional woman, her participation in an international scholarship scheme had been the first time that she had been required to think about her work as ‘development’ work:

Personally speaking, it was the first time that the term ‘Women in Development’ touched my life directly. Unlike many other women involved in the various development schemes, I did not receive funding for developing projects, such as weaving, chicken raising or making artificial flowers; instead, funding came in the form of a scholarship provided by a project with the intent ‘to utilise social sciences and related fields to guide women’s development in Thailand’. (Sinith 1998:2)

Like Sinith<sup>1</sup>, the majority of the women in this research do not see themselves as ‘development’ workers. They have diverse professional histories, and some, through the

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<sup>1</sup> Thai authors are generally known by their first name rather than their surname. In keeping with this convention I have referenced their first name in the text, and provided both names in the bibliography.

scholarship process, as well as through other work and personal commitments, have come to see parts of their lives as within the orbit of the goal of 'development'. Despite their diverse histories, however, they share a number of common life experiences. Most importantly, all were chosen among thousands of professionals to take part in a scholarship scheme that tasked them with bringing home new skills to address the considerable social and economic challenges faced by their nation. These women represent this responsibility, and the opportunities it has provided, in a variety of different ways and their narratives provide a useful place from which to begin to flesh out a picture of the impact of this type of educational aid.

The twelve women who took part in this study were recruited through invitation letters sent out on the researcher's behalf<sup>2</sup> by NZAID, and through additional participant referrals. All of the women were offered the opportunity to conduct their interview in Thai (with a translator) or in English. All chose to complete the interview in English. Each participant was interviewed once and one participant brought a partner along who also contributed to her interview. I asked the women to provide reflections on the impact of the scholarship experience on key areas of their lives, including on their view of self, relationships, and work life. I also asked participants to comment on what they saw as the broader impact of these scholarships on women's lives and on 'development'.

Their stories are written up using a process called 'poetic transcription' (Glesne 1997). Popularised by the work of feminist sociologist Laurel Richardson (1992; 2003), this technique is one approach to enlivening interview data through representing an interview as a poem. Richardson (2003) argues that representing speech as a poem rather than as blocks of verbatim quotation more effectively captures the rhythm and vitality of speech:

When people talk, ... whether as conversants, storytellers, informants, or interviewees, their speech is closer to poetry than it is to sociological prose. Writing up interviews as poems, honouring the speaker's pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on, may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting in prose snippets. (Richardson 2003:516)

Richardson calls interviews written up this way 'narrative poems' (Richardson 2003:516). I have instead chosen to call them 'poetic narratives', as I believe, in my own work at least, that the emphasis is more on the use of techniques designed to present narrative in a way that captures the vitality of the spoken word, rather than on the use of narrative data to create engaging poems. Corrine Glesne (1997:213) argues that rather than representing poetry proper, poetic transcription can be said to 'approximate ... poetry through the concentrated language of interviewee, shaped by researcher to give pleasure and truth'.

In order to construct the poetic narratives, the original words of participants were used, but not every word or sentence is included and sentences are usually, but not always, presented in the order that they appear in the interview (Glesne 1997; 2003; Richardson 1992). In line with Glesne (1997), I also gave myself limited permission to drop or

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<sup>2</sup> The interview data was collected by Kirsty Wild.



change word endings (such as ing, s, ly), and occasionally change verb tenses where this would make a significant contribution to increasing the flow or clarity of a sentence.

Richardson (2003) argues that objections to the process of poetic transcription commonly centre around the belief that the researcher is effectively ‘constructing’ a story by using text selectively. However, as Harry Wolcott (2001:36) argues ‘there is no such thing as pure description’ within any genre of qualitative research, as the researcher is always actively involved in decisions about what interview material will be included and excluded, and what ideas it will be called upon to ‘support’ or ‘refute’.

Richardson (2003:507) asserts that more positivist qualitative researchers are often simply not honest about their role in shaping their data: ‘...they write the body of the text as though the document and quotation snippets are naturally present, valid, reliable, and fully representative, rather than selected, pruned, and spruced up by the author for their textual appearance.’ Carolyn Ellis (1999:676) also problematises the lack of acknowledgement amongst many qualitative researchers about the role they play in ‘constructing’ their data through the practice of ‘selecting and editing verbatim prose out of context, and then surrounding it with their own constructed analytic contexts.’

The use of poetic transcription as a technique to represent interview data is consistent with the post-positivist acknowledgement of the researcher as an active collaborator in, rather than detached ‘conduit’ of, participants’ stories (Denzin & Lincoln 2003). This acknowledgement is central to the feminist/ethnographic commitment to research as a collective practice (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2010) that fosters mutual exchange and the co-creation of knowledge (Rivera & Gudeman 1995).

### **Beginnings: The scholarship as promise of adventure**

In their late twenties or thirties, most of the women in this study were well established within careers in the Thai state sector when they decided to apply for a scholarship to enable them to study abroad. The scholarship experience was represented as offering an opportunity for much sought-after change and growth in their professional lives. For some, this was linked to a desire to ‘upskill’ and to expand their professional competency, and for others the experience was also seen as an antidote to a degree of workplace boredom:

To be honest, I had worked for my company for many, many years.  
More than ten years.  
And I thought maybe it’s time for me to change,  
to do something new,  
and make my life more colourful. (Sukhon<sup>3</sup>)

Study abroad was positioned as an opportunity for adventure and personal expansion:

I wanted to grow, to become wiser. (Patcharee)

My dream was to go to a native English-speaking country,

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms have been used.

to study their culture and their way of life,  
to open my mind about that. (Pensri)

I decided that it would be a challenge to study abroad.  
I thought that I would like to know about life abroad,  
what is it like? (Sanoh)

As well as seeking out the personal expansion made possible by travel, the study experience was also identified as an important opportunity to revitalise professional practice through mixing with different groups of professionals and gaining access to new sources of expertise and advice:

I needed to gain more knowledge, more experience,  
and I wanted to share some perspectives with others.  
I think, it's not always enough to just mix with Thai colleagues.  
I think I needed more input.  
Because, sometimes we discuss issues, like, for example, we were  
discussing poverty alleviation, and at that time, we needed to talk with  
some experts to get some technical input.  
We just never think outside the square.  
So I thought, if I go to other places, other continents, other countries,  
perhaps, I can broaden my view.  
So, I thought I should apply for a foreign scholarship. (Patcharee)

Study abroad was also positioned as an opportunity to develop a picture of oneself as stronger and more competent, and was often accompanied by a desire to increase the level of respect or 'acceptance' they received in their work and personal lives. Many of the participants had previously witnessed the increase in social status experienced by those who had studied overseas:

Everyone thinks that people who study abroad,  
when they come back, they get a promotion,  
they can get good things,  
and more acceptance from other people.  
It is better than studying in Thailand for a Masters.  
It's totally different, the level of acceptance.  
It's a positive thing, to study abroad. (Malai)

Most of these women saw the issue of 'acceptance' as a gendered one. They asserted that Thai women currently experience lower status in the workplace and have difficulty gaining respect for their ideas or support for promotion:

I want to be promoted, to be at a higher level in my work.  
And I wanted to be accepted more.  
In Thailand, right now, men and women are still not equal when I  
compare to other countries.  
Even if you work very, very hard, better than some men, you are still  
looked at like you are a woman.  
So, I wanted to be more accepted by people.

I mean, women can work as equals to men. (Noi)

A degree from abroad is seen as a tool women can use to increase the amount of respect they receive in the workplace, as well as improve their chance of gaining a promotion:

In our culture, I think that the men, they get ahead of the women, a little bit.

Not much, but a little bit.

And, in the past, the executive positions were for men more than women. Women can be an executive, now, I think, because they can get a degree from a foreign country.

If they don't get that type of degree, it's hard for women to get a chance to prove that they can be a good executive. (Lawan)

I think higher education makes women more accepted.

Women are more highly regarded as a result of their education.

It makes women more independent and believe in themselves and their capabilities more. (Sukhon)

The desire for greater independence and emotional autonomy was a central theme within the narratives of many of the participants:

I wanted to know about life overseas.

Being a Thai kid your parents and society always make a frame for you. My family, my dad, always made us a frame – what we could do and where we could go.

And we couldn't cross that line.

So, I think I've been very dependent on my parents.

Partly, I wanted to be independent;

but I couldn't really develop the skills to be independent if I was still around that environment all the time. (Kulap)

Another woman reported that as well as providing the opportunity for professional development, the scholarship experience supplied her with an opportunity to 'test' and develop her autonomy within her relationship:

We plan to get married,

and I felt like, before I get married, I better do something that I want.

Before I get into another kind of life with another person,

I wanted to see if I could handle anything by myself,

living by myself. (Nok)

If most of the women were looking for a challenge that would enable them to expand their personal and professional horizons, then none were disappointed. Like most international students, the initial adjustment period was represented as an extremely stressful time, but a time that opened up opportunities for new loyalties, new personal and professional goals, and ultimately a new sense of confidence, autonomy and achievement.

### **Survival, change, and new solidarities**

Arriving and settling in was represented as one of the most stressful experiences many of the women had ever faced. With varying degrees of English competency, most also struggled with communication in the first few months. They also reported that their status as scholarship students added an extra source of pressure during the settling-in period:

Because I was a scholarship student, I had to be serious about study,  
otherwise they would have sent me back without any degree,  
without anything.  
And that is not good!

So, for scholarship students, it is more serious than for other students who use  
their own money.

It is very difficult. (Noi)

The challenges associated with the adjustment period meant that all reported feeling an increased sense of confidence and self-pride associated with their ability to 'survive' this experience:

Now, when I face a tough problem, I can get through it.  
I think I can live anywhere outside of Thailand, now.  
I think that I would dare to go outside Thailand more than in the past.  
(Lawan)

I'm stronger.  
Before I went to New Zealand,  
I couldn't go places on my own.  
But there, I had to.  
Travelling in Thailand,  
I could not do that by myself.  
But now I feel comfortable and I feel very safe to go overseas.  
Like, last year when I went overseas, I travelled alone.

So, it's made me stronger.  
I can make decisions.  
Because, here, I feel a young girl all the time in my family.  
But when I was there, I had to do things on my own and make decisions.  
(Lek)

Being pushed outside their normal social networks, mixing with a range of people from different cultures, and living in a culture with quite different values from their own, meant that this was a time in which the participants spent a lot of time reflecting on values and morals – their own and those of others. The majority of the participants felt it was a time in which they were able to enlarge their understanding of culture and human

nature, and that this process had given them an expanded sense of solidarity with people from other cultures:

There were people from Indonesia, and people from the Pacific Islands.  
It was great. It was good,  
because when we talked, we learnt about each other's cultures, including  
things that were funny for me, and things that I did, that made them  
laugh. (Sanoh)

Education is not only about academic knowledge.  
It's about the way you look at life,  
the way you look at people,  
the way you interact with people.  
So I think that if people get to learn more about other people, and try to  
learn something from other people, that is a great development.  
You expand your thinking, and expand your views. (Sukhon)

For the majority of the women, these positive experiences of cross-cultural learning, combined with the experience of postgraduate study with its greater emphasis on debate, had led to a greater commitment to the contribution that 'open-mindedness', collaboration and debate can make to improving workplace outcomes:

When I was in New Zealand, I had many friends from other places around the  
world.  
And I learned about their cultures.  
And I had new experiences.  
Especially cultural ones.

I learned how Kiwis are, how Arabs are, or South Americans are, but  
overall, what I learnt in New Zealand was about working with people.  
I learnt that, when we discuss some topics, we can have arguments,  
anytime.  
We can have our say.  
But in Thailand, it's sometimes difficult, you know.  
It's difficult, because you have seniority.  
We cannot say anything much,  
because we have to respect the seniority of our people.  
But, in New Zealand, I learned that, oh, it's good to have more debate, or  
have more discussion, so we can get better results. (Malai)

If I have done a project and someone criticises my project, I am open-  
minded and I listen to them and I can discuss it.  
I am more open-minded, when I compare myself to before I went to  
New Zealand.  
Because Thai people, some people, cannot listen to others.  
But when I studied in New Zealand and I got the experience from  
studying abroad and overseas, now, I am more open-minded, and I can  
listen.

Even people who are in a lower position than me, if his comments are good, that is good.  
Because nobody knows everything, right?  
That has been good for me. (Noi)

As well as a stronger commitment to collaboration within their workplaces, most of the women also expressed an increased interest in the benefits of international networking and collaboration.

### **New networks and new leadership opportunities**

Almost all the women felt that their greater cultural awareness combined with improved English were crucial facilitating factors in enabling them to increase the opportunities they had to represent their organisations both at home and abroad – as participants in international conferences and as liaison people with external organisations and consultants:

When you have to deal with foreigners, you have to know their culture.  
There are so many foreigners that come to our place to meet with us, so I have learnt more about how to deal with them, what is polite and what is not.  
It's good to be able to communicate with foreigners who come here, including representatives.  
And, also, you can participate in international meetings.  
You will be nominated or assigned to attend conferences to gain more knowledge.  
If I could not speak English well, I could not participate. (Lek)

As well as seeking out new overseas contacts, the women were also keen to maintain relationships with lecturers and friends that they had met in New Zealand. These relationships remain an important source of ongoing professional support, collaboration, and advice:

I still have connections with international friends.  
I have Sri Lankan friends, Kiwi friends, and Australian friends, and we help each other.  
Whenever we have academic conferences this is useful for me.  
We can exchange information.  
I have very good friends in Malaysia, as well, who work in a similar area to me. It's relevant to my office to work together in terms of sharing knowledge and ideas about practice. (Malai)

The participants reported that the opportunity to learn about the cultures of other ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations, in particular, has made an especially valued contribution to their personal and professional lives, opening up important opportunities for ongoing bilateral and multilateral collaboration in the region.

Importantly, several of the Thai women mentioned that study abroad has also given them the confidence that they can travel alone safely. They noted that it is still not common or generally considered acceptable for women to travel by themselves, and that study abroad has given them the confidence to challenge this. This was seen as important in terms of widening the opportunities they had to represent their organisations both at home and abroad.

Two of the women also mentioned getting private consulting and/or lecturing work as a result of their study abroad. Other work-related outcomes varied widely amongst participants. It is difficult to generalise about specific skills gained, as there are such a diverse range of professions involved in this research, but some important and recurring 'generic' work-related skills gained included improved public speaking skills, being able to think and write more critically, improved ability to write long reports, greater knowledge of information technology, and better research skills. Many also felt that their greater English-language fluency, in particular, had shifted the power in their dealings with development consultants:

In the next two decades,  
we will have to talk with foreigners,  
with experts,  
or consultants from abroad.  
I expect that I should do some kind of negotiating,  
not just listen to what they say.  
I like to negotiate.  
I like to talk or indicate that that is right, and that is wrong.  
I don't want to follow their ideas. (Sanoh)

### **Engaging with New Zealand culture, and notions of Western 'difference'**

Finally, most of the women felt that they had developed a number of new value commitments that they attributed to their time in New Zealand. Protecting the environment and 'living simply' were two of the most significant. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that all but two of the participants are now based in Bangkok, they represented New Zealand life as 'slower', 'greener', and more 'simple'.

Interestingly, several of the participants represented the New Zealand way of life as an exemplar of the 'middle way' or 'sufficiency economy' advocated by King Bhumibol Adulayadej, the revered Thai monarch. Described as a form of populist 'localism', the concept of the 'sufficiency economy' combines an emphasis on economic self-reliance, with Buddhist notions of 'moderation' and ethical conduct (United Nations Development Programme 2007:30). A highly revered monarch, the King's ideas on the sufficiency economy have become increasingly interpreted as providing a 'middle path' that will enable Thailand to reap the rewards of globalisation whilst avoiding the economic instability, inequality, materialism and environmental destruction that have come to represent the country's experience of market economics (Connors 2003; Hewison 1999).

The participants' study experience has also challenged some of their 'positive' stereotypes about life in Western countries like New Zealand, including the idea that there is no poverty in the West:

I think that my thinking is quite mixed up about whether New Zealand is a rich country.

Probably, most of the houses around the campus were for the university students, so that's why they don't have money.

But the people from places like 'The Warehouse'<sup>4</sup>, I mean they actually didn't look like they were wealthy.

I mean maybe because I looked at them through my glasses, because for me, rich people, they have to look just like this,

just like in Thailand, just like people here in Central Chitlom<sup>5</sup>.

I mean, maybe their living standards are high, but maybe they like simple things.

So maybe I just judged them from my point of view.

I just thought that because New Zealand is regarded as a rich country, the people should be dressed like rich people here. (Sukhon)

In challenging some of their own stereotypes about Western 'difference', most returned with a greater sense of the similarities between Thai culture and New Zealand culture:

Most New Zealanders that I met were kind of like Thai people.

Many of the people that I met, they were very kind.

I had heard that most foreigners were very confident people, and they were not interested in Asian people.

I got that from TV or something,

because I didn't have many opportunities to talk with them. (Lawan)

Positive personal and work outcomes were also balanced by a range of not so welcome negative consequences of the scholarship experience.

### **Unwelcome opportunities: negative outcomes of the scholarship experience**

Some of the women reported experiencing a number of new unwanted responsibilities in their workplace as a result of their time abroad. Increased responsibility for translating and producing English language materials was a particular area of contention:

During the first three or four months after I came back I was assigned to write many, many technical papers.

I felt like I was trained to do a translation job.

I felt like this is not what I've studied, and it's not what I want to do here.

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<sup>4</sup> A budget department store in New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> An upmarket department store in Bangkok.



When I first got back, I was also expected to receive any new foreigners in my office.

And all the English stuff came to me.

Actually, everybody in my division knows English, but all the English stuff came to me.

And I thought, oh, I am supposed to be doing other jobs, not only this.

(Patcharee)

Some also experienced problems coping with returning to a more hierarchical work environment:

I try to do things like in New Zealand,

but with the senior staff, I can't do it so easily, as I feel like I am just a normal staff member.

I don't have a position that allows me to have my say.

Actually, I can have my say,

everyone can have their say,

but it's not going to pass my boss,

right?

It's our culture.

So, sometimes it's difficult for me to express my knowledge or my ideas,

or to give suggestions to the people in higher positions, senior people.

(Malai)

Restructuring during their absence was also a problem for several participants. One woman was actually demoted while she was away. Worrying about keeping up English fluency was also listed as a new source of pressure and worry. In addition, two of the women remarked that the bonding associated with the scholarship scheme has frustrated their desires to do a PhD:

It's quite hard to go to New Zealand, again.

Since I got a promotion to be an executive, it's now quite hard to go again,

because, when I was studying in New Zealand, my professor said 'you have potential to study for a doctoral degree.'

And I said, yeah, I am interested in that, but I signed a contract with my organisation, so I have to get back.

And the human resources department said I think you should go back home first. My professor said, once you go back to your country it's quite hard when you get a promotion to do a PhD. (Pensri)

While all the participants identified negative outcomes associated with the scholarship experience, these references were consistently outweighed by references to positive outcomes. In many ways the emphasis participants placed on the positive aspects of the scholarship experience is consistent with the considerable social status attached to this type of educational opportunity – as a 'reward' for professional or academic excellence. It is also consistent with the ways that many of the women came to understand the opportunity as a 'test' of their autonomy and resilience. Finally, it was also evident to me that a number of participants felt that this was an important opportunity to publicly

record the gratitude they felt (or thought they should express) for being granted a scholarship by NZAID.

## **Gains and losses: Critical reflections on the value of the scholarship experience**

As well as the source of important new professional networks and competencies, the women in this research identify the scholarship experience as a particularly important opportunity to cultivate the courage that is central to becoming more emotionally autonomous. The opportunity to move away from traditional systems of family support offers opportunities to 'test' and develop one's resilience, to experience new types of intimacy, and to develop new support networks. To be a Thai woman, as one participant (Jom) argued, is to be like a 'frog in a coconut shell', 'overprotected by family', and therefore discouraged from becoming courageous or independent. It is a situation she asserts, that leaves you 'dependent' on your parents and 'vulnerable to the outside world'.

Anthony Pramualratana (1992:45) contends that in Thai society boys are granted a freedom to 'paiteaw', or 'roam', that is denied to girls. Female autonomy is discouraged on the grounds that women are considered to be 'weak, indecisive, emotional, dependent, and less productive than men' (Suteera, 1990:7). Women are said to be 'chaang thao lang' or 'the hind legs of the elephant': the followers, not the leaders (Panit 1999:3; Sawadee 2004; Van Esterik 2000:55)<sup>6</sup>. There is also considerable cultural emphasis on the need to 'protect' women in order to ensure that they remain 'virtuous'. It is traditionally said, Sawahit Kittitornkool (1999:9) argues, that to have a daughter is like 'having a toilet in front of one's house': meaning that 'unless one keeps the toilet clean, it can be defamed'.

As a result there is much greater emphasis on the importance of women following the rules of 'kalatesa', or polite or 'appropriate' behaviour (Van Esterik 2000:36). In this social context, the scholarship experience provides many women with a sought-after opportunity to crack the 'coconut shell' and to roam: to travel, to learn to enjoy their own company, to trust in their ability to cope with the new and unfamiliar, and to expand their sense of community and belonging.

In learning to live and travel alone, and to form new friendships and romantic relationships with people from different cultures, the participants report an increased sense of 'worldliness', and an expanded sense of connection to an international 'community'. Immersion within the values of another culture and participation within a more critical academic environment also appear to encourage greater reflexivity, and a

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<sup>6</sup> Van Esterik (2000) points to the challenges associated with interpreting proverbs. While this particular proverb is most commonly interpreted as an assertion of women's inferiority, she argues that some Thai feminists have contended that it could also be understood as a statement about the 'complementarity' of men and women, or even women's superiority: After all, feminist writers Srisambhand and Gordon (in Van Esterik 2000:45) argue, 'the elephants hind legs are the first to move'.

clarification of personal and professional goals. All of these things make participants feel wiser, more competent, more resilient and more intrepid.

Finally, this research shows that the scholarship experience also provides women with greater opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration: for negotiating with foreign consultants, for attending conferences abroad, for networking and collaborating with overseas professionals, and for representing their organisations both at home and abroad. These opportunities are identified as particularly valuable to women because of the cultural restrictions they report experiencing on their personal autonomy and their opportunities for travel and cross-cultural learning. All of these opportunities increase the presence and contribution made by women to international decision-making forums. In these ways, the scholarship experience makes an important contribution to improving the global leadership capacities of women. This research confirms findings by previous researchers that development scholarships represent an important capacity building opportunity for women – providing ‘visibility for female competence in society at large’ (UNESCO 1999:12), and cultivating important opportunities for leadership and greater social participation.

The personal and professional benefits associated with the scholarship programme were also accompanied by a number of difficulties, including frustration readjusting to a more hierarchical working environment, as well as having to take on unwanted new responsibilities associated with English-language translation. As well as considering the individual ‘losses’ associated with participation in development scholarship schemes, it is also important to attend to debates over the wider social ‘losses’ associated with this type of aid. One of the most controversial outcomes associated with development scholarships is the ‘brain drain’, or the tendency of overseas-educated scholars to emigrate and take their much-needed skills with them. This was not a significant issue within this research, primarily because the participants were required by the Thai government to work off reasonably long bonds (up to six years) when they returned, limiting their capacity to emigrate.

It may also be related to the fact that (apart from the one Thai student who was undertaking further study overseas) I only conducted research with Thai returnees who were living in Thailand. I was not able to make contact with returnees who are no longer resident in Thailand, because NZAID only keep a record of the initial application address supplied by former students.

In addition to concerns about ‘brain drain’, other writers argue that even when sojourners do return, they can experience a kind of ‘heart drain’ (Nash 1997:81) which prevents them from properly integrating into their communities again. Hannah Nash, who explored the depiction of higher education abroad in novels by African writers, argues that returnees are often characterised as alienated from their culture in ways that cause conflict within their home communities:

Students who do not return are quite literally lost to the community but even the students who do return are likely to disappoint their community by encouraging Western values at the expense of local African values,

such as accepting monetary wealth as a measure of success. (Nash 1997:87)

Tanzanian writer Lioba Moshi (in Okeke-Ihejirika 2004:179), discussing the experience of African women who have attended university at home or abroad, asserts that the cultural burden on educated women to prove that they have avoided 'heart drain' is so acute that they often come to experience higher education as a 'double-edged sword'. As she summarises:

Although formal education can be used to raise women from the shackles of poverty and inequality, it can also make the same women victims of constant criticism for abandoning cultural and traditional values. (ibid)

Most of the women within this research did report returning with a number of new value commitments that they identified as 'Western', including commitments to more debate and less hierarchy within workplaces, and greater personal autonomy for women. However, participants generally identified relationships with other international students as an equally important source of new cultural learning. As a result, while the opportunity to learn about life in a 'Western' culture may, for some, have initially been a motivator for applying for a scholarship, participants were more likely to represent the outcome of the scholarship experience as an opportunity to learn about and become more reflexive about cultural difference (and similarity) in general.

It was also interesting to note the ways in which a number of the Thai participants represented the New Zealand 'model' as a sort of exemplar of the 'middle way' or 'sufficiency economy' advocated by their monarch. Thus, these participants actually positioned New Zealand not as a more 'modern' – in opposition to their more 'traditional' or 'underdeveloped' – society, but as a culture that has adopted a version of modernity that provides an alternative to their experience of 'over'-development. Leaving aside the issue of the accuracy of this perception of New Zealand, the fact that the participants understood their experience of New Zealand's 'simple' life as a resource for critiquing the model of Western-style development adopted by their countries unsettles easy assumptions about the scholarship process as incubator for commitments to Western materialism.

Beyond the issue of the 'brain drain', it is perhaps inevitable that the scholarship experience entrenches a degree of middle-class privilege at the individual level. Because these scholarships aim to provide professional development for 'policy shapers' – those who are in a position to affect change at an institutional level – and in most societies these roles are occupied by an educated middle-class, then providing further educational opportunities to this group is obviously likely to increase the privileges they enjoy. However, critiques of increases in middle-class income and status also need to take into account the unequal access women generally have to these resources in most societies. The interplay between class and gender privilege and inequality is complex.

Nerida Cook (1998:259) argues that in the Thai context, urban middle-class women's advantages 'have more to do with class than gender equality'. Certainly, there are stark differences between the 'choices' available to educated middle-class urban women and those open to poorer rural women who have had little or no access to education. While Thai women make up 54% of university enrolments (UNESCO 2010:374), they are also over-represented amongst those who have little or no access to education. Two thirds of those who experience illiteracy in Thailand are women (UNESCO 2010:310).

Despite the fact that these women most certainly experience a degree of class privilege, it is important to remember that they continue to act as important 'role models' of female courage and success. These women are, as Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika (2004:3) argues in her own research on the experience of tertiary-educated African women, a 'small minority whose life chances ... greatly affect and define the prospects of the entire female population'. Here I would agree with Jane Goldsmith and Valerie Shawcross who contend that while these sorts of educational opportunities continue to act as important routes to leadership within Third World societies, they are particularly valuable to women:

We would not argue that access to higher education in the West will be the answer to bringing about continued development in the third world, nor the answer to the inequality of women. But higher education, and particularly higher education overseas, remains a criterion for political power, influence, reward and status. So long as this is the case, lack of access for women, and particular third world women, will remain a further barrier to their full and active participation in shaping the future of their own societies. (Goldsmith and Shawcross 1985:5)

## Conclusion

These research findings point to the continuing relevance of development scholarship schemes as a tool for promoting women's empowerment. I have argued that the scholarship experience provides women with important opportunities to cultivate leadership qualities such as autonomy and courage, as well as to expand their sense of membership of, and authority within, the international policy community.

This research also highlights the importance of taking a holistic approach to examining the gendered outcomes associated with development scholarship schemes. While traditional evaluations of these schemes continue to focus on a narrow range of educational and employment outcomes, the women within this research challenge the notion that the development scholarship experience should be considered strictly, or even primarily, an 'academic' experience. Indeed the participants within this study placed as much emphasis on the benefits of 'extra-curricular' aspects of their scholarship experience, immersion within another culture, living and travelling alone, adventure, and new friendships and networks, as they did on their academic experience. Friendship, family and self weave in and out amongst the academic and the professional within their narratives in a way that highlights the need to do justice to the multi-faceted nature of this type of educational event.

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