



# Tonan Talk

## A Brown Bag Lecture Series

**Title:** Gender and Economic Empowerment in Four Mekong Countries: Findings from Field Research

**Speaker:** Dr. Donna L. Doane, Gender and Development Studies, Asian Institute of Technology

**Date:** October 25th (Fri.), 2013, 12:00 - 14:00

**Place:** Small Meeting Room II (Room No. 331), Inamori Foundation Memorial Building, Kyoto University

### **Abstract:**

Our study, for NTNU and the Norwegian Research Council, examines whether ‘empowerment’ has become a buzzword, as Andrea Cornwall suggested, or whether it still has relevance in the context of women’s economic empowerment projects in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. The study began with an inquiry into how projects are designed in each of the four countries – i.e., *Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam* – studied in the region, and how empowerment has been defined and can therefore be assessed as one of the key objectives. Interviews with national-level policy makers and with provincial and local women’s organizations and project beneficiaries in each of the four countries indicate that ‘empowerment’ is seen in dramatically different terms at each level as the concept is translated and re-translated, changing from a more individual-centered and rights-based conception at the international level down to the national level where the implication of women gaining ‘power’ is in most cases carefully avoided, to the provincial or local level where people often explain empowerment as a household or community process rather than in terms of increasing women’s autonomy.

Findings from fieldwork in each of the four countries are then used to begin to understand under what conditions women’s economic empowerment projects affect gender relations in a positive, neutral or negative way (e.g., with the projects increasing household tensions and, in some cases, even gender-based violence), and under what conditions the positive changes may be sustainable. A key part of this relates to how men are included in the design and implementation of the project. An extension of this project, funded by AusAID, will bring in questions of social protection and security/insecurity as they relate to women-oriented economic projects in each of the four countries, with a focus on different vulnerable groups (tied to poverty, inter-community violence, HIV status,

ethnic minority status, and other considerations). This research is also designed to help us rethink approaches to gender and empowerment using a *sciences from below* framework, with basic concepts and goals defined as much as possible from the point of view of project 'beneficiaries' themselves.

**Bio note:**

**Donna Doane** is a Senior Researcher (Ph.D. in Economics from Yale University) teaching Gender and Development Studies at the Asian Institute of Technology. Her field of interest is gender and development, informal economy involving women workers, home-based workers' unions and networks, community and women's organizations, technology/industrial policies, indigenous knowledge and technology blending, analyses of prejudice and discrimination at the intersection of gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion and other social divisions.

She has been conducting research in Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos recently on women's economic empowerment projects. Currently she is working as Programme Consultant and researcher with HomeNet South Asia on urban poverty in South and Southeast Asia. She has participated in projects on the above issues not only as researcher but also as consultant and practitioner in wide settings, from Asia to Africa.

**Moderator:** Yoko HAYAMI, CSEAS, Kyoto University

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