CULTURAL MEANINGS AND PRACTICES REGARDING PREGNANCY, CHILDBIRTH, AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN: A COMMUNITY STUDY IN MYANMAR

CHIT KO KO

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THESIS ADVISORS: LUECHAI SRINGERNYUANG, Ph.D.; SUPHOT DENDOUNG, Ph.D.; SUCHEELA TANCHAINAN, M.A.

ABSTRACT

Women’s cultural interpretations and practices regarding pregnancy and childbirth shed light on the situation of women in contemporary rural Myanmar communities. This thesis reports an ethnographic narrative case study of eleven pregnant mothers living in a rural Myanmar community through analysis of gender relations and societal change.

The findings reveal that childbirth territory is maintained as women’s domain, but to some extent, it is medicalized. Women hold a unique and equal position to men in the domestic as well as the public sphere, however, there is a distinction of gender inequality in childbirth because of the dominant concept of *phoun* (intrinsic capacity of men), which is a central notion of male chauvinism. Rural women follow cultural practices because of strong women’s networks and supportive communities. On the other hand, they have been introduced to modern medicine, and their economic situation also shapes cultural practices to an extent because women are engaged in income earning work in the contemporary rural society.

The findings also suggest that user-friendly culturally sensitive maternal and child health programs should be considered for women in the community. Through women’s networks, it is also recommended that health education programs regarding maternal and child health and other locally endemic health problems in the community be considered in order to improve women’s health.

KEY WORDS: CULTURAL PRACTICES / CHILDBIRTH / RURAL WOMEN / GENDER / CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY /