

# Strategies for Solving the Social Inequality Problems of Highland Ethnic Women in Thailand

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Social inequality greatly impacts people's lives, bringing about social problems within communities. A case study of the highland ethnic women in Nan, Thailand shows that gender inequality is the main cause. This research aims to study social inequality of highland ethnic women, and to develop an effective strategy for solving problems through cross-sectoral participation. Mixed quantitative and qualitative methods are used, including a questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and group discussions among involved people and stakeholders. The data is analysed using content analysis. The developed strategy's potential efficacy is examined by experts. The results reveal that a high level of social inequality for these women leads to inferior status and problems with day-to-day living. The most effective implementation strategy involves the interwoven notions of "Create, Enhance, Raise, Monitor and Evaluate".

**Key words:** *Problem Solution Strategy, Social Inequality, Highland Ethnic Women.*

## Introduction

The United Nation stands at the forefront of the gender inequality movement, aiming to eliminate discrimination against women and girls; promote the empowerment of women; and achieve equality between women and men, as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace, and security (United Nations, 2013). Clearly, social inequality problems exist worldwide, caused by an income gap, gender inequality, health care, and social class (Trimek, Jermsittiparsert, Akahat, Sieangsung, & Ratchaphan, 2016; Haseeb, Suryanto, Hariyatie, & Jermsittiparsert, 2019). Examples include ethnic inequality in Guatemalan women's use of modern reproductive health care (Ishida, Stupp, Turcios-Ruiz, William, Espinoza, 2012), gender inequality in land access in rural Africa (FAO-Dimitra, 2008), inequality of pay based on ethnicity in Britain (Breach, A. and Li, Y. 2017), and health



inequalities in England (Baker, Connolly, Fellows, 2017). Platt (2011) cites the relationship between ethnicity, poverty and age. There is inequality across different ethnic groups who are poor, young or old. In Thailand, there is an "ethnic gap" in Thai public policies that concern poverty and inequality. It is often considered a proponent of social conflicts, particularly when people feel disadvantaged or face inequity or unfairness (Burasit, 2012). Social inequality is often found in groups of low-income, disadvantaged, and ethnic people. According to a report from the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA, 2012), the social inequality of ethnic groups resulted from inequality of opportunity due to poverty, excluding unequal redistribution, which related to racism, and discrimination, which led to exclusion from the opportunity to access to public services.

Despite Thailand being open to gender equality, social inequality remains for ethnic women. Studies from the Office of Law Reform Commission of Thailand and UN Women showed that five groups of ethnic women, namely Lahu, Mian, Hmong, Dara-ang, and Pkakayor, have been facing social inequality due to unfairness in households, communities and villages. This is transferred through traditional beliefs for generations, by village heads, rite and spirit leaders, the elderly and male household heads. These beliefs affect women, by restricting land possession, influencing divorce decisions, limiting access to education, restricting opportunities for community leadership, and impeding decision-making power on marriage and sexual interaction (Jernsittiparsert, 2016). Moreover, a lack of access to equal rights and justice is perpetuated by government officials, who use the law without considering the role and status of gender, fail to consider discrimination and ethnic prejudice, and who are not taking steps to eliminate unfair practices (Thabhiranrak & Jernsittiparsert, 2019). Consequently, crucial problems arise: access to useful health care, accusations of invading national parks, and sexual violation by employers (Thai Post, 2014). These problems may affect Thailand over the long term if they are not eliminated (National Research Council of Thailand, 2015).

Despite the government's proposed solutions – including measures and projects to enhance education, public health care, the introduction of funds for residents with indeterminate nationality status – problems still exist, due to a lack of clear and continuous process especially target groups' rights-protection law in order to reduce gaps during the policy implementation process. The enhancement of successful policies should include the further application of human rights across the community, more opportunities for development, the expansion of education, and economic enhancement, particularly geared toward ethnic communities (RILCA, 2013). If opportunity is ubiquitous, and distributed equally and fairly, social inequality can be decreased as intended in the 2017 Thai Constitution. Measure 17 of the Constitution states, "Citizens are legally equal; have rights and freedom; are equally protected by law; men and women have equal rights, no gender inequality, no discrimination due to racism, language, sex, age, disability, health, social and economic status, belief, education, or



political attitudes.” (Secretariat of the Senate, 2017). These measures are also in accordance with the Strategic Plans for Woman Development’s vision (2017-2021), which emphasises the need to create social equality, security and safety, helping develop the nation. The directions of the 20-Year National Strategy (2017-2036) also emphasise the need to remedy Thai social inequality in Strategy 4, which aims to “create equality opportunity and righteousness.” (Office of the National Economic and Social Committee, 2017). In addition, the National Plans for Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2036), Issue 12, focuses on human development and participation of all age groups, and promotes access to fundamental rights. According to the Basic Minimum Needs report, people’s income in the sample area was ranked nearly the lowest, with the income per capita of 46,924 baht a year associated with the least happiness because the district’s citizens failed to meet five indicators of the basic human needs criteria: (1) weight of infants at birth and an access to epidemic vaccination scheduled for children aged 0–12 years; (2) safe and permanent housing and security of life and property; (3) access to a kindergarten or a preschool for children aged from three to five years, and the Thai language literacy and basic mathematics ability of people aged from 15–59 years; (4) people aged 15–59 years having career and income of at least 38,000 baht per household per year; and (5) low rates of drinking alcohol and smoking, as well as participation in useful community activities (Nan Community Development Office, 2017). This information illustrates, quite clearly, Thai ethnic inequalities, since most of the citizens comprise of different, scattered ethnic groups, each of them with their own culture. The highest number of ethnic women in Nan was Lua (6,158), followed by Hmong (48), and the most scarcely populated district was Mlabri (33) (Social Development Center Unit 25 Nan Province, 2014). Hmong women, as an example, have always suffered from social inequalities. They lack the right to be a community leader, their way of living is controlled by men, and divorce, marriage and household living depends on a husband’s family and relatives. Of course, this is because of typical ethnic culture, where women are viewed as followers, and therefore Hmong women are not accepted by most community members (Transborder News, 2014).

This study’s strategic guidelines to improve inequality within communities of ethnic women include: the reform of gender inequality law; the establishment of rights to housing, education /training, protection and security; legislative protection of ethnic women’s human rights to prevent discrimination and prejudice; and finally, enforcing UN Human Rights law, while enacting special measures to reform community culture and beliefs. However, the reduction, or elimination, of ethnic inequality depends on the participation of every sector working together to improve quality of life, empower communities, and reduce social inequality. Another essential factor (Saengsuwan, n.d.) is equality of opportunity, which depends on five pillars of structural reforms: the revenue system, land occupation, the welfare system, the educational system, and a decentralisation from government to local communities. It is critical that implementation of the proposed guidelines under these reform structures utilises a



mechanism design targeted at the program's target groups, invoking the participation of local communities for decision making on resource management, and in other contexts.

## Literature Review

Ethnic inequality is a prevalent problem the world over. There are a number of harrowing implications of gender inequality, including a lack of access to education, violence against women, sexual assault and rape, and human trafficking (Carolina Sherwood Bigelow. n.d.). The phenomenon has reportedly caused a lack of access to land in rural Africa, due to an absence of land tenure legislation, coupled with a lack of political motivation (Fao-Dimitra, 2008). Discrimination in North Africa and the Middle East paints females as inferior to males, with the prohibition of women driving in Saudi Arabia, as well as a lack of freedom of choice in marriage in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Middle East, women often lack the right to pass citizenship on to their children, and in Afghanistan, girls are often kept at home, as harmful gender norms do not value or permit their education (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Beyond cultural and religious norms, governance and politics also constrain women, by removing their ability to attain political power (Hussein & Jermisittiprasert, 2019). Moreover, inequality can develop due to other variables; for instance, sizable income inequality in Indonesia influences human development (Pide, 2018).

Similarly, problems of inequality can appear in Thailand within an individual's own demographic, but also between intermingling ethnic groups. The major causes of social inequality are personal status, Thai citizenship status, and the day-to-day realities of living as a Thai citizen. The inequality in personal status, identified by the state's law, reflects the problems of living legally as a Thai citizen. Thailand's inequality in education is due to a misunderstanding of the right to go to publicly-funded schools, a limitation on graduation, and no opportunities to participate in curricular decisions which could match or respond to ethnic culture. An inequality of healthcare, with services bound to the digits of the Thai identity card, results in problems on personal status and rights to obtain healthcare services. Inequality of discrimination also exists, despite the declaration of human rights principles, specified in international law, forcing all members to have policies to eliminate every form of racial discrimination; enhancing respect to human rights and basic freedom, without discriminating differences in race, gender, language, and religion; and legally ensuring the equity of life. Unfortunately, Thailand does not participate as a member in this treaty on non-governance, nor on refugee status. Consequently, it does not issue any international laws for protecting the rights of the non-nationals, but only ensures legal rights for internal protection. However, the problems caused by inequality in Thailand result from discrimination against people of different languages, cultures, ways of life, settlements, prejudice and traditional attitudes of Thai people toward ethnic people (RILCA, 2013).



The major problem causing social complications between and among ethnic groups, is the right to live as a Thai citizen, which includes the right to receive government services and welfare, education, health, career access, income opportunity, etc. Houle (2017) stated that inequality's effects on redistribution depended upon the ethnic structure of the poor (people with income below the median). The increase of redistribution was determined by economic inequality, which was based on ethnic minority status of the poor, apart from the ethnic majority. Similarly, Jirada's study (2013) revealed that northern ethnic provinces of Thailand had serious educational inequality, especially the border provinces. Its effect, shown in the regions, revealed that the average years of schooling were negatively correlated with equality in education. She suggested a decrease in the number of illiterate people by expanding compulsory education to lower secondary school. In addition, Benjamin et al. (2017) found that, although agricultural opportunities in Vietnam significantly resulted in increasing inequality, the steady development of wage-labour markets in both urban and rural areas played more crucial roles. Moreover, Wesly and Peterson (2017) stated that several analyses and reflections on the causes and consequences of economic inequality changes have increased in recent years, whereas others studies have diverted the real problem of poverty, and mentioned that economic inequality, itself, was also a crucial problem.

The problematic position of ethnic groups in Thai society is a critical issue for the country, which can affect individuals, communities, societies, and the country itself. Solutions are needed that require every section of Thai society to take part in developing practical ways to reduce existing problems, while responding to the needs and context of ethnic groups. This research aims to study the problematic circumstances of groups of highland ethnic women, covering eight dimensions of: income; property occupation; access to social services and infrastructure; unfair treatment by government agencies; poverty and community empowerment; participation in the development of societies; quality of life; and gender equality and the right to give opinions.

The development of this strategy focuses on the participation of government agencies, the private and civil society sectors to arrange measures/guidelines in order to enact solutions. The process covers every aspect of the operation, beginning with making decisions, starting implementation, gaining benefits, monitoring and evaluating. This is practiced under the thinking framework of the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2017-2036); governmental administrative policies; and social reform under the Council of Peace and Order's policies; the strategy to create fairness and reduce social inequality in the National Economic and Social Development Plan No. 12 (2017-2021); guidelines following the master plans of Thai Ethnic Minority Women Development 2015-2017; the Strategy for Women Development 2017-2021; and other relevant research. The strategy is expected to strengthen highland ethnic communities of women.



## Methods

A mixed method of quantitative and qualitative research was used to develop and evaluate the strategy. The research was divided into three phases.

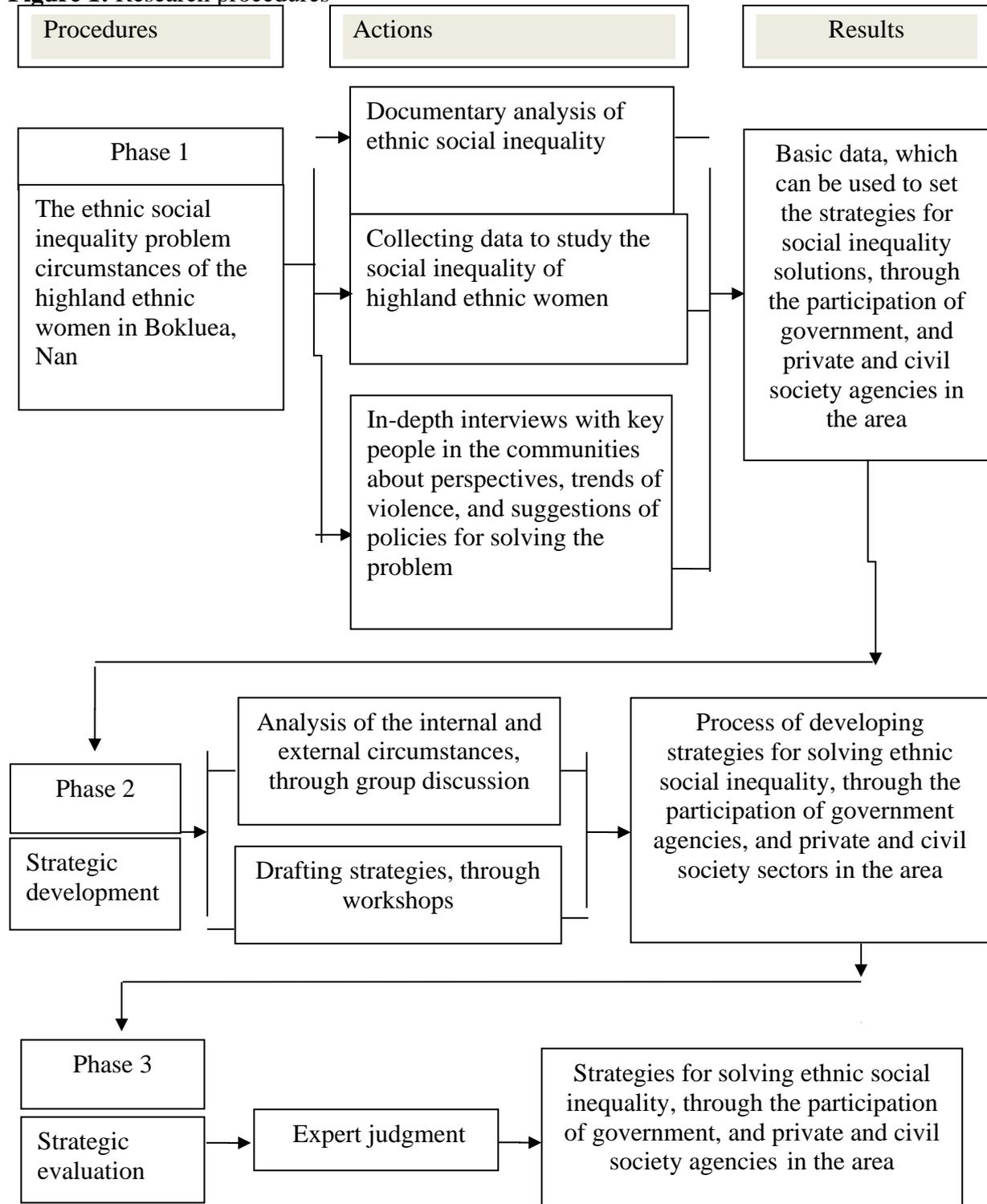
**Phase 1** involved the study of problems caused by social inequality of highland ethnic women. This phase consisted of documentary analysis, inquiry and interviews. Firstly, documentary analysis was applied, reviewing data associated with ways of thinking and principles collected, along with theories from documents, books, statistic information, articles, research reports, plans relating to the development of ethnic people in Thailand, and government policies to solve issues of inequality. Secondly, quantitative data was collected, through an investigation of problematic social inequality scenarios using a five-rating scales questionnaire (developed by the researcher) based on the social inequality index frame by RILCA (2013); and from a collation of solutions for social inequality problems by a committee from 25 institutes in Bangkok (2011); the Development of Citizenship and Community Association; the Thailand Market Research Association; the Thailand 20-Year National Strategy (2017-2036); the National Economic and Social Development Plan, Edition 12; and Women Development Strategy (2017-2021). The statistically-qualified questionnaire covered eight issues of inequalities of income; property occupation; access to social services and infrastructure; unfair treatment by government agencies; poverty and community empowerment; participation in development of society; quality of life; gender equality and opinion expression. Finally in-depth interviews were held with four groups of 55 key people, namely 10 government administrators, 15 officials, 15 community leaders, and 55 female, ethnic representatives from Hmong, Lua and Mlabri. These groups were sampled to study different perspectives around the issue's nature, including violence, causes and trends of social inequality existing in the area, and models for creating fairness and reducing inequality. The data collected from the interviews was analysed using content analysis. The results of the analysis were taken into consideration for determining perspectives on social inequality and related problems in the context of these highland ethnic areas.

**Phase 2** involved the development of a strategy to reach solutions and emphasised the participation of government agencies, as well as private and civil society sectors. To achieve this, the results from the analysis in Phase 1 were used as basic data for the creation of a development strategy. This began with an analysis of ethnic social inequality and then a drafting of strategy in the workshops, with 30 representative participants from government agencies, private and civil society sector, academics and teachers.

**Phase 3** involved the evaluation of proposed solutions. Results were used to build an assessment form, which was then assessed by five experts. This process considered each strategic issue, along with the associated measures or guidelines proposed for effectively and

practically implementing solutions, using the Index of Concurrence (IOC) technique. The following is a diagram showing the procedures involved in the research.

**Figure 1:** Research procedures



## Results

The results of the research are divided into three phases, as shown in Table 1. The results of the study relate to inequality scenarios of the highland ethnic women – through quantitative study – showing a high significance of problems generally, with income inequality rating highly, along with poverty and community empowerment at a high level, and property occupation at a high level.

**Table 1:** Mean and standard deviation, level and rank of the social inequality conditions divided by income and other respects.

<b>Social Inequality Conditions</b>	$\bar{X}$	<b>S.D</b>	<b>Level of Inequality</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1. Income	4.23	0.16	High	1
2. Property occupation	3.93	0.21	High	3
3. Access to social services and infrastructure	3.52	0.22	High	5
4. Unfair treatment by government authority	2.49	0.20	Low	8
5. Solutions for poverty and community empowerment	3.94	0.22	High	2
6. Participation for developing societies and quality of life	3.74	0.23	High	4
7. Gender inequality	3.18	0.20	Average	7
8. Giving opinions	3.46	0.22	Average	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.56</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>High</b>	

The in-depth study revealed that social actors generally have similar viewpoints on the social inequality of highland ethnic women. The administrators, officials and community leaders assumed that inequalities result from income inequality, caused by areas of their establishment. These were mostly considered to be in the areas of national parks; the ineffectiveness of the government's strategies and structure; a lack of right over land; inequity of access to justice and fairness; and cultural limitations, beliefs and values, including different ethnic identities and ways of life. These problems affected ethnic women's ways of living, especially due to the inability to secure rights of land for cultivation, a lack of skills and knowledge about agriculture, or no other skills for extra-profitable work. This led to income or economic insecurity, and poverty. However, most social actors believe that the degree of these problems has been reduced, since several sectors realised the impacts caused by inequality. They have integrated cooperative and creative projects and activities, helping improve the quality of life for these highland ethnic women. Concerted projects can solve problems surrounding land rights, cultivation, and the acquisition of skills for extra profitable work. Therefore, effective



mechanisms for mobilising work processes could solve poverty, distribute land rights more equitably and help foster the effective use of the land by entrepreneurs, and should be implemented.

Furthermore, community leaders suggest that areas be developed as cultural tourist attractions, based on typical aspects of ethnic cultures, which reflect different ethnic identities. The development should reflect the community's current ways of living and better enhance their quality of life. Cultural tourism would be a good method of mobilisation, in the form of OTOP Tourist Community of Cultural Innovation, which mixes cultures and the ways of life of different ethnic groups through community tourism, via typical ethnic group learning centres. These provide knowledge, build understanding and raise social acceptance. Government agencies should contribute to the success of reducing a community's income equality. In addition, ethnic women's inequality is largely caused by aggregation of race – discrimination which can be solved legally through active measures and activities that allow ethnic women to equally access government projects and services.

This strategy effectively balances the five notions of “Create, Enhance, Raise, Monitor and Evaluate.” *Create* refers to creating policy mechanisms and working on social inequality problems. *Enhance* refers to the enhancement of community participation and connecting networks throughout the province, and connecting with government agencies. *Raise* is the raising of quality of life and increasing ethnic women's capacity, based on their unique ethnic culture. *Monitor and Evaluate* is a strategy integrating the ideology of the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2017-2036); Government Policy – Social Reform of the National Peace Corps; the strategy to create fairness and reduce social disparity in the 12<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021); Guidelines for Implementation of the Master Plan for Ethnic Development 2015-2017; Women Development Strategy, 2060-2021; and other governmental measures. It focuses on driving the implementation of strategy on all levels and sectors, emphasising humanity and community as being at the centre of the participatory process. This ensures an integrated balance of all dimensions, with evaluation encompassing the vision, mission, strategies, objectives, target index, and tactics of each strategy.

The first vision is to reduce inequality, create fairness, raise the quality of life, mobilise practical policy to create social inequality solutions, create a systematic mobilising mechanism under community self-reliance, and focus on integrated area development through partnership networks. The mission is to create a policy mechanism and mobilise solutions to address social inequality; enhance community participation and connect network cooperation; raise life quality and enhance the ability and capacity of women, based upon ethnic culture; and finally, monitor and evaluate the results of the strategy. These strategies aim to achieve the vision and mission targeted, through the four below strategies.



*The first strategy* is the creation and implementation of a policy mechanism based on the objective, target index and tactics. Its objective is to enhance community policy, driving the concrete implementation of solutions. This should focus on the power of community self-management, leading to community fairness and a better quality of life. The target index comprises of, firstly, a policy mechanism to solve this problem; and secondly, improvement to highland ethnic women's quality of life. It involves two tactics.

The first tactic is the creation of a policy mechanism for social inequality prevention, along with solutions emphasising the power of community self-management through various measures. (1) Highlight social inequality issues as community targets, retrieving basic information for surveillance of risk, prevention, direction, protection, and assistance under community cooperation and partnership networks. (2) Organise the short, medium, and long-term strategic plans of the sub-district development under the 20-Year National Strategy (2017-2036), and other public plans involved. (3) Determine guidelines for implementation and collaborative working with local administration organisations. (4) Set a committee for social problem prevention and solutions, comprising of the community leader, ethnic women representatives and local official representatives. (5) Organise activities for developing the community leaders' abilities to cooperatively work with relevant partnership networks. (6) Organise information sharing, and knowledge learning, stages between partnership networks. (7) Distribute appropriate resources to support various women's organisations. (8) Increase the local organisations' potential to have the locals receive required public services and resource redistribution. (9) Increase local communities, and their citizens', capacity and power for self-management, providing opportunities to take part in determining community targets for quality of life improvement and development plans.

The second tactic is to mobilise a model of community self-management through various measures. (1) Integrate cooperation between communities, local administration organisations and relevant sectors, to integrate this policy. (2) Arrange a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or similar agreements with government agencies, private, and civil society sectors for mobilising the community policy. (3) Support operations following the government policy in the area through "integrated participation of all sectors" guidelines. (4) Enhance the public sector to create plans and budgets supporting this mission, and directed by law, reflect the improvement of ethnic women's quality of life in every aspect of social inequality. (5) Arrange action plans for preventing and solving problems related to ethnic women's social inequality, emphasising participation and integration of the plans of partnership networks. (6) Organise projects for enhancing community leaders' and officials' abilities to develop work in the area effectively and transparently. (7) Organise workshops with local administration organisations and partnership networks to transfer community policy, strategic plans and action plans. (8) Mobilise operations to solve poverty by offering opportunities to possess their own land for cultivation.



**The second strategy** is the enhancement of participation and connection of partnership networks in communities. Its objective is to enhance and expand cooperation between internal and external partnership networks, so that problems are solved sustainably. All sectors in the area participate in every process of the solution. The target index comprises firstly, of internal and external partnership networks that work cooperatively for solving the problems; secondly, of government agencies, as well as private and civil society sectors is. It utilises three tactics.

The first tactic is to raise awareness of social responsibility between community and partnership networks through various measures. (1) Organise community forums informed by the actual circumstances of women suffering from social inequality in local areas. (2) Arrange activities that spark ideas, empower, and determine targets and concepts for community members, so they can cooperatively work continuously to prevent, protect and solve these problems. (3) Establish a union of community members to become partnership networks, aiming to foster mutual learning. (4) Support work run by government officials, especially the enactment of transparent laws, which avoids discrimination and has regard for human and ethnic women's rights. (5) Raise community leaders' potential to inspire community members to have confidence, a sense of belief, and the ability to present their ideas, while supporting administrative governance, and a conscious sense of self-reliance in the community.

The second tactic is to develop a participatory community learning system, comprising of the following measures. (1) Support academic divisions for academic development and research, creating in-depth knowledge of solutions, based on readiness and availability of social capital, aiming at practical solutions to social inequality. (2) Offer opportunities to highland ethnic women community members to take part in participatory processes of thinking, planning, deciding, and taking responsibility for problems. (3) Create a community environment or atmosphere useful for learning and understanding basic information about rights and opportunities to access government welfare through community learning centres. (4) Use community radio/voice as a primary medium to inform stakeholders. (5) Enhance career groups in communities to be centres for useful activities, knowledge and skill sharing. (6) Create a participatory learning process between communities and relevant sectors, to cooperatively determine solutions.

The third tactic is to develop and connect cooperative networks in local areas and provinces through various measures. (1) Create and develop bilateral/multilateral cooperation networks. (2) Support the cooperation between partnership networks. (3) Connect participation of surveillance, stop risk factors, protect and assist the women with individuals, families, and communities through community meetings. (4) Support community members and partnership networks to help provide information and deal with unfair treatment by government officials.



(5) Cooperate with relevant government agencies, asking them for support in terms of budget contributions and solution incentives.

**The third strategy** is to raise the quality of life, enhancing ethnic highland women's potential and ability. Its objective is to develop ethnic highland women's potential and ability to develop self-reliant careers, to take part in community life, and to play significant roles in community development, with a good attitude and sense of equality. The target index comprises of a mechanism focusing on economic security and its practical implementation, based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy: the idea that creating social security in an area can eliminate inequality of access to public services and infrastructure – which leads to sustainable development of their quality of life – and a comprehensive promotion of social protection and rights. It utilises four tactics.

The first tactic is to develop ethnic highland women's potential through various measures. (1) Cooperate with government agencies to develop women's potential, to be able to effectively do a part-time job other than cultivation. (2) Cooperate with academic sections to support the compulsory education of women and children of all ages. (3) Create a skill development curriculum, based on culture and other requirements. (4) Cooperatively organise training courses about the modern economy and information technology, increasing production efficiency, supporting marketing and business practices, and arranging learning projects to prepare participants for change, based on local wisdom and modern technology.

The second tactic is to develop a mechanism of raising economic security, based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, comprising of various measures. (1) Cooperate with the government on improving laws, acts or regulations to be more useful for communities, especially the highland ethnics' land rights (for both occupation and utilisation), and enhancing communities' rights to manage their resources via public meetings. (2) Cooperate with local administration organisations and partners, on projects enhancing access to basic services, such as career development; and mobilise the implementation of continuous career development, both in agriculture and in other careers, based on community contexts and requirements; increase the range of careers/work, providing greater income to communities through tourism, including OTOP tourist villages, cultural innovation, individual ethnic learning centres, while offering improved native products with local wisdom.

The third tactic is to develop a social security mechanism comprising of various measures. (1) Enhance current community welfare systems, improving auditing, controlling, observing and protection to create fairness for ethnic women; assist in addressing women's health problems and risky epidemic-related behaviour; provide healthcare services through a network system enabling the transfer of patients via a radio system. (2) Cooperate with local administration organisations to create projects for developing knowledge and understanding about a



community's welfare system. (3) Cooperate with government agencies to enhance the telecommunication network and high-speed internet services, and support access to formal education for women and children.

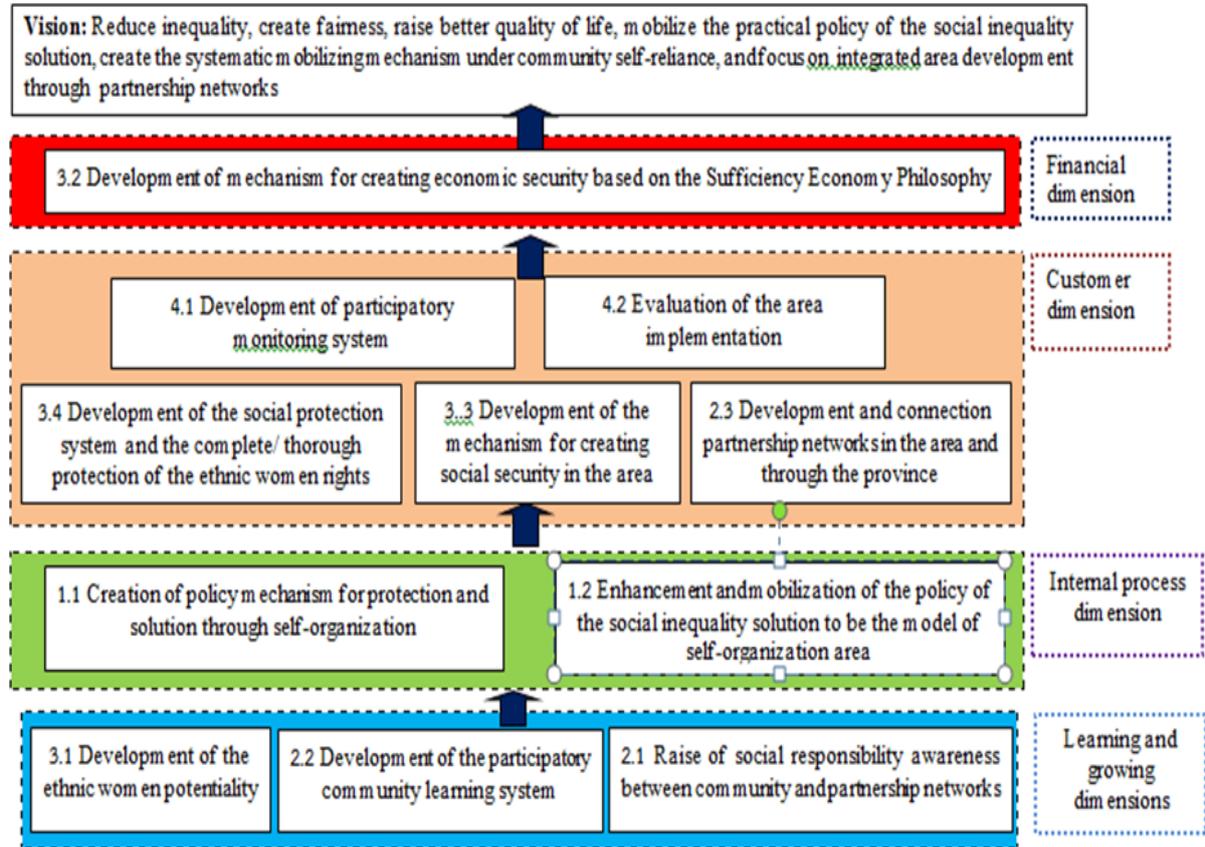
The fourth tactic is to develop a system of thorough social protection, as well as the protection of rights for highland ethnic women, which comprises of various measures. (1) Cooperate with local administration organisations and partnership networks to create a care and assistance system, utilising cooperative assistance networks; knowledge about community members' quality of life; a framework for women's empowerment; and a network database containing their information. (2) Cooperate with the local administration organisations to organise projects for the protection of women's rights and maintaining surveillance.

**The fourth strategy** comprises of monitoring and evaluation. Its objective is to determine a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating processes and procedures relevant to solving highland ethnic women's social inequality, so that the results or collected data can be used to indicate implementation advancement. The target index comprises of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate solutions, as well as the ethnic women's satisfaction. It comprises of two tactics, helping develop participatory systems to monitor process. (1) Cooperatively set a plan for monitoring implementation progress, included in the annual community development plans, with guidelines for monitoring. (2) Develop data systems and monitor implementation progress, closely following the plans and measures set. (3) Develop the participatory monitoring system to examine progress, according to the strategies, and other sectors' operations essential to monitoring and maintaining a better quality of life.

The second tactic is to evaluate the implementation in a local area, using various measures. (1) Organise community forums, for cooperatively sharing and learning, with local administration organisations and partnerships, analysing women's circumstances and problems, and evaluating progress. (2) Continuously supervise, monitor and evaluate the implementation. (3) Revise, evaluate and give suggestions to increase the efficacy of processes and strategies employed to reach targets and goals, including suggestions for future improvements.

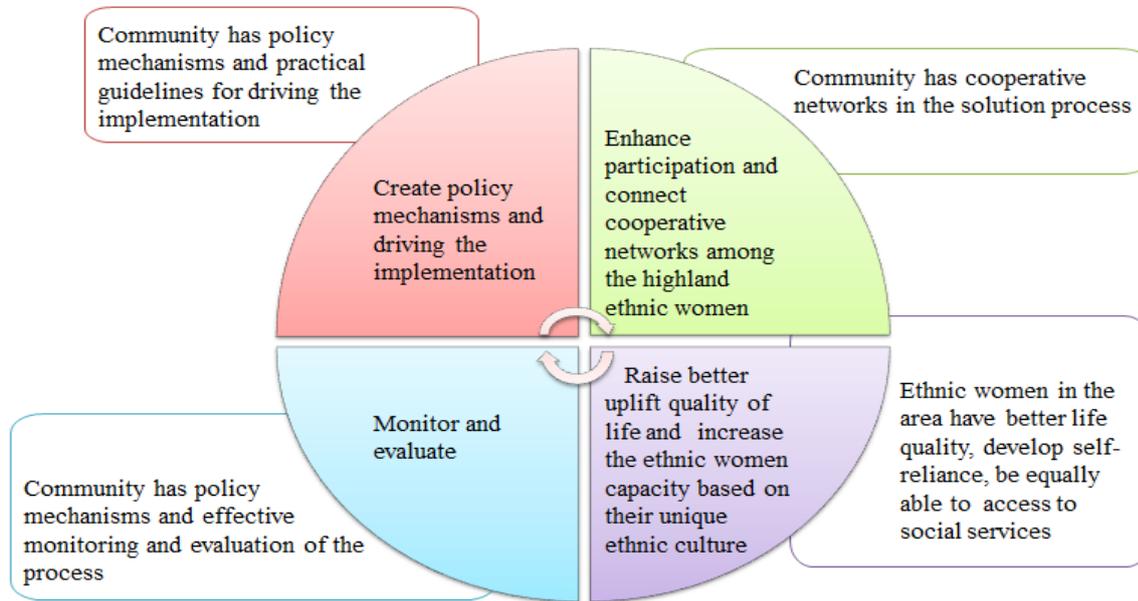
The overall process is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2.** Strategic map of proposed social inequality solutions for highland ethnic women in Nan, Thailand



The evaluation – using IOC – by experts, showed that, on the whole, the strategy for solving the problems of inequality through the participatory process developed by the researcher is both appropriate and practical. The goals of the strategy are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3.** Strategic goals of social inequality intervention for highland ethnic women through the participation of government, private and civil society agencies



The appropriateness of this strategy, evaluated by experts, shows that all of the strategies employed are appropriate and practical for implementation, as shown below.

**Table 2:** The appropriateness of this strategy, evaluated by the experts

Strategies	IOC	Results of evaluation	Level
1. Creation of policy mechanisms and mobilisation of implementation	0.91	Appropriate and practical	3
2. Enhancement of participation and connection of partnership networks	0.96	Appropriate and practical	1
3. Raising the quality of life and the enhancement of ethnic women's potential and ability	0.92	Appropriate and practical	2
4. Monitoring and evaluation	0.90	Appropriate and practical	4

## Discussion

The problems of social inequality for highland ethnic women are significant, with income inequality ranked first. Social inequality problems are also ranked highly, particularly when considering income inequality and redistribution, due to remote residences in the arid highland; inconvenient transportation; traditional cultivation depending on nature; and living in national parks. These factors result in opportunity inequality – a lack of access to public services,



restricted rights to access farmland and secure living arrangements. Opportunity inequality affects both poverty and economic inequality. This finding is similar to a study by Bureekam (2003), which found that redistribution inequality caused poverty and decreased living standards of ethnic cultivators' households in the north of Thailand. Similarly, Benjamin et al. (2017) mentioned the steady development of wage-labour markets in urban and rural areas was significantly important, reducing social inequality together through agricultural opportunities, especially for ethnic minorities. Accordingly, Sasin Business Administrative Institute at Chulalongkorn University (2011) suggested guidelines to decrease social inequality and create fairness in Thai society, by structural reforms of taxation, land occupation, the social security system, the educational system, and decentralisation of power to locals. To achieve these reforms, it is necessary to create mechanisms and tools to reach target groups, recognise area contexts, and address local participation in decision making on resource management.

This strategy is appropriate, possible and practical for implementation, preferably using the outlined tactics, creating policy mechanisms to prevent and solve problems caused by social inequality. It should utilise these tactics to develop an area self-management model, featuring cooperative work and the participation of partnership networks in local areas. This corresponds to the theory of local community self-management, which emphasises a community's ability to deal with problems, relationships, and the freedom of ideas, expressions, and knowledge, transferred through a community's own local wisdom and community experiences. This can be in the form of community plans and projects, community organisation systems, or community rules and regulations (Puang-ngam, 2010; Bayham, 2016). Similarly, Kantarot (2009) suggested raising awareness of community participation, by highlighting the significance of solutions, supporting cooperative activities, raising the sense of belonging of citizens in the community, and contributing to community grouping and process achievement. A Pukyaporn, Buranakoon, & Pakchok (2014) study found that successful factors in solving community social inequality included community members grouping for self-reliance, which is potentially best practice for building community empowerment. Therefore, the process of social inequality in the target area can be achieved, and plans and projects can be mobilised to effectively implement solutions, if the community has policy mechanisms and measures to drive social inequality solutions in local areas, emphasising the power of self-management to create fairness and reduce social inequality.

A strategy for enhancing community participation and networking cooperation in these areas should emphasise the raising of awareness of social responsibility cooperation between the community and their partnership network, developing a cooperative community learning system. This will improve networking cooperation, as highland ethnic women are in remote and arid areas, with inconvenient transportation and obstacles, with ineffective governmental structures and administrative mechanisms to solve these problems. These women have no rights or opportunities to access these public services and the necessary infrastructure for



living, which corresponds to McPherson et al.'s findings (2001). Ethnic minorities and racial backgrounds caused the strongest social divisions, excluding age and religion, as suggested by Chowathanakun (2014). Social inequality can be solved by enhancing community member participation, brainstorming with key members of the community and integrating their insights to solve the problems holistically; academically solving problems; and establishing systematic operations in regards to community participation. This process will improve the quality of life for community members, enable them to build community empowerment and reduce social inequality in different dimensions, corresponding to the National Peace and Order Council's reform issues (Office of the Permanent Secretary for Defense, 2014).

The strategy for raising quality of life, and enhancing highland ethnic women's abilities, are based upon elements of particular ethnic culture, women's potential development, and the surveillance and protection of women's rights. To effectively solve problems, this process should follow the four main tactics mentioned above. This will result in the instigation of the solution's practices, causing significant change, corresponding to the 20-Year National Strategy (2017-2036) (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2017) and the 12<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021). This will also emphasise strategy for creating fairness and reducing social inequality, raise the quality of social services – especially in education and public healthcare – increase trained workers and create policies to support developing skilled workers, so they can receive a higher income, as well as developing social and economic opportunities (Department of Women's Affairs and Family Institute, 2017).

The “Monitor and Evaluate” strategy should focus on developing tactics for monitoring progress through participation, create a didactic plan for solving social inequality with women through local partnership, and ensure this plan is continuously implemented in community development plans, which would be set under the agreement of community participation. Every procedure of the process should be continuously monitored, supervised, evaluated and revised for following practice. The data can also help guide useful measures and improve operation efficacy, helping meet the actual requirements of the partnership and stakeholders, as specified by Thailand's current strategy for women's development, from 2017-2021.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study reveals the major hindrance to achieving solutions, due to non-cooperation within the community and between stakeholders. To achieve the goal of implementing an effective and practical strategy, the operation will need to be a model or a master plan, offering a clear solution for tackling issues of social inequality for highland ethnic women in Thailand. Government agencies should be very well aware of the importance of protection and efforts to implement solutions, while respecting local communities' participation and emphasising



continuous coordination. In addition, the strategy should be determined and integrated in provincial action plans, including within agencies from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Digital Economy, Agricultural Extension, Community Development Department, and the Department of Women's Affairs and Family Institute. All processes and procedures should focus on participation of stakeholders, and be genuinely supported by the senior executives involved, including through the creation of a collaborative mechanism and through partnership.

To reduce social inequality, highland ethnic women should be given opportunities to increase their income, through continuous training and the ongoing development of knowledge and expertise in their careers. The government should redistribute land rights to real farmers who do not illegally invade national parks, and enact the law – or install other measures – to solve the problem of land shifting from farmers to entrepreneurs. Medical personnel and public health resources should be redistributed adequately and fairly throughout each community. Skill training should be increased through activity-based learning, so that community members can attain more information and knowledge. The government should also enhance access to qualified social services via telecommunication technology and innovation; protect rights; increase channels for claims and assistance for impacted ethnic women; instil positive attitudes in government officials and community leaders; eliminate discrimination; and give more opportunity to women to participate. Also, government agencies should support synergistic careers, based on geographic potential, encouraging cooperative resource usage, connected with local wisdom and local culture to develop community enterprise. To improve society and quality of life, government agencies should build participation in planning, helping advance women's role in society – helping with saving activities – and eliminate gender inequality, including offering opportunities for women to become skilled workers, rather than this only being an option for only the men in their families. Women should have the right to give their opinions to their communities in order to develop their own potential.



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