The first study in English to analyse in detail the position of women in Thai politics, this edited volume addresses the challenges, obstacles and opportunities for increased women's political representation in Thailand. With contributions from some of the leading scholars in the field, it subjects various dimensions of women and politics in Thailand to both theoretical and empirical scrutiny; in so doing, it draws together into one volume previously fragmented research in this field.

Will Thai politics be different with an increase in the number of women politicians?

What are the possibilities for Thai women to take proactive initiatives that aim to transform Thai politics into being more gender aware and equal?

In seeking to address these and related issues, the analysis brings together a complex interplay of factors, such as traditional Thai views of gender and politics; the national and local political context of the Thai constitution of 1997; and recent experiences of selected women politicians in the legislative and executive branches of Thai government.
WOMEN AND POLITICS IN THAILAND
WOMEN AND POLITICS IN ASIA
Series Editors: Kazuki Iwanaga (Halmstad University) and Qi Wang (Oslo University)

Women and Politics in Thailand
Continuity and Change
Edited by Kazuki Iwanaga

Women’s Political Participation and Representation in Asia
Obstacles and Challenges
Edited by Kazuki Iwanaga
WOMEN AND POLITICS IN THAILAND
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Edited by
Kazuki Iwanaga

niassPRESS
Women and Politics in Asia series, No. 1

First published in 2008
by NIAS Press
NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies
Leifsgade 33, DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark
tel (+45) 3532 9501 • fax (+45) 3532 9549
e-mail: books@nias.ku.dk • website: www.niaspress.dk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Women and politics in Thailand. – (Women and politics in Asia ; 1)
I. Iwanaga, Kazuki
320’082’09593

ISBN: 978-87-91114-34-2 (hardback)
ISBN: 978-87-91114-35-9 (paperback)

Typeset by NIAS Press
Produced by SRM Production Services Sdn Bhd
and printed in Malaysia
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Preface

We started our odyssey with this book project when I was a visiting professor at the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University in Bangkok in 2002. In various ways the intellectual atmosphere there provided the most helpful environment for my work. The possibility of a book on Thai women in politics developed over the numerous discussions I had with the potential contributors to such a book. Over the ensuing years we have encountered various obstacles due mainly to the heavy commitments of my co-authors to other tasks. When we began the book project, we were struck by the dearth of writing about women’s participation in Thai politics. To my knowledge, there is virtually no systematic research on women’s participation and representation in Thai politics. This lack of scholarly attention can be explained in part by the fact that men continue to outnumber women substantially in Thai political life. Given the importance to democracy of women’s participation in politics, this gap in the scholarly literature is lamentable. The purpose of this book is to close the gap.

Our aim is twofold: to explore various aspects of continuity and change in the status and role of Thai women in politics, and to account for the paucity of women leaders in elected and appointed offices.

In the course of developing this book, I have accumulated a number of personal and intellectual debts. I am most grateful to Professor Corrine Phuangkasem, then Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University for her invitation to work there, and to my other colleagues for their welcome and support. I also would like to thank Matilde Johansson, my research assistant, for not only proofreading the chapters but also for her skilful editorial assistance. This
volume has greatly benefited from the support and encouragement of Gerald Jackson, Editor in Chief at NIAS Press. He has given me the strength to keep this work going. Without his patience and support, this book would not have been possible. In addition, I would like to thank my colleague and friend, Dr. Hans Bengtsson for his encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Birgitta, a constant source of warmth and support.

Kazuki Iwanaga
**List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADB</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APSW</td>
<td>Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPWIP</td>
<td>Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</td>
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<td>CPT</td>
<td>Communist Party of Thailand</td>
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<td>CSC</td>
<td>Civil Service Commission</td>
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<td>EC</td>
<td>Election Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDI</td>
<td>Gender-related Development Index</td>
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<td>GDRI</td>
<td>Gender and Development Research Institute</td>
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<td>GEM</td>
<td>Gender Empowerment Measure</td>
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<td>GO</td>
<td>Government Organisation</td>
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<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGP</td>
<td>Income-Generating Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labor Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCO</td>
<td>Non Commissioned Officer</td>
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<td>NCWA</td>
<td>National Commission on Women Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDI</td>
<td>National Democratic Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSM</td>
<td>New Social Movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OAG</td>
<td>Office of the Attorney General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS</td>
<td>Permanent Civil Servant</td>
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</table>
Women and Politics in Thailand

PR  Proportional Representation
PWCO  Police Women Commissioned Officers
SAO  Sub-district Administrative Organization
SEAWatch  South-East Asia Watch
SES  Socio-Economic Status
SUB  State University Bureau
TAO  Tambon Administrative Organization
UNDP  United Nations Development Program
UNESCO  United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIFEM  United Nations Development Fund for Women
WeMove  Women's Movement in the Thai Political Reform
WIP  Women in Politics
Notes on the Contributors

Juree Vichit-Vadakan teaches at the School of Public Administration, the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in Bangkok. She had served as Dean, Vice-President and President of the same institution. She chairs the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society, which promotes civil society as key development partner. Dr. Juree has been appointed as the Head of the Thai delegation to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. She is also the Secretary-General of Transparency Thailand, a chapter of Transparency International. Since October 2006, Dr. Juree has been appointed to the National Legislative Assembly. She earned her BA, MA and PhD degrees from the University of California Berkeley.

Supatra Masdit was elected to Thailand’s Parliament seven times between 1979 and 2000 and was the first woman parliamentarian appointed to a cabinet position. While serving as Minister to the Prime Minister’s Office, she spearheaded the establishment of the National Commission on Women’s Affairs, an advisory board to the Prime Minister on policies concerning women’s affairs. Since 1991 she has also served as president of the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics, a regional NGO that promotes women’s participation in politics. For the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, she also served as convener of the NGO Forum. In 1989, His Majesty the King of Thailand bestowed on her the honour of “Khunying,” a prominent title of distinction, in recognition of her public and social service.

Suteera Vichitranonda is a prominent gender advocate in Thailand and co-founded, in 1990, the Gender and Development Research
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Institute (GDRI), the research arm of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. Mandated to carry out action research on policy issues and policy advocacy related to gender equality, under Suteera’s oversight the GDRI has successfully made many positive gains for women including influencing the government’s policy on women and increasing women’s participation in decision-making. Suteera has served in many important national committees related to women and gender equality. She is currently the president of both the Gender and Development Research Institute Foundation and the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women.

Maytinee Bhongsvej is currently the Executive Director of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, a charitable non-governmental organization in Thailand, managing the work, including both welfare and proactive activities for women and children. For the past 15 years, she has served as a gender consultant and trainer and has been actively involved in policy advocacy and gender mainstreaming activities of many international and national organizations.

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Amporn W. Tamronglak is an Associate Professor in Public Administration at the Faculty of Political Science, with Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. She received her PhD in Public Administration from the Center for Public Administration and Policy at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University in Blacksburg, Virginia.
Notes on the Contributors

She also worked with the Office of the Civil Service Commission to develop the ‘Human Resource Accountability Framework’ for the Thai bureaucracy, which has now been implemented by the provincial bureaus. The framework was the extension of her previous research on accountability-based culture for the Thai bureaucracy and in good governance. The latter work, led by King Pradjadhipok’s Institute team, won her the Excellent Research Award from the Prime Minister.

Cambria Hamburg is currently a Program Assistant for the Child and Youth Protection and Development unit at the International Rescue Committee. She studied gender and development in Thailand under the aegis of a Fulbright grant, working with local women’s organisations in Isaan, the north-eastern region of Thailand, and with professors and students at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok. She is interested in women’s political participation, civil society development, and democratisation. She has served as a Research Associate at the Council on Foreign Relations where she researched numerous topics including democratisation, women’s rights, and U.S. foreign policy.

Kazuki Iwanaga, formerly a senior research fellow at Stockholm University, teaches political science at Halmstad University. He is also Head of the Department of Political Science. He was a visiting professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, Bangkok in 2002, and an affiliated research fellow at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University in 2002–2004. His research interests include gender and politics, democratic governance, and women and politics in Asia. He is the author, editor, and/or co-editor of several books, book chapters and working papers on women and politics in Asia, including Women’s Political Participation and Representation in Asia: Obstacles and Challenges and Gender Politics in Asia (both published by NIAS Press).
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Women’s Political Representation from an International Perspective

KAZUKI IWANAGA

Women’s social and economic position in Thailand has improved substantially in recent decades due to developments in female enrolment in higher education and adult literacy, labour force participation, and GDP per capita. Thai women have been able to vote since 1932, significantly earlier than in many other Asian countries. However, in the seven decades since, Thai women have made only limited headway in the political arena and their near exclusion from high-level policy-making constitutes an element of continuity. Only a few women have achieved political positions of any significance despite the fact that they constitute half the electorate. Indeed, women are grossly underrepresented in the nation’s policy-making, whether in the government, the Parliament, or provincial and local decision-making bodies. They are also underrepresented at higher levels of the civil service. Change has occurred, however, with respect to the rapid growth of women’s organizations and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of which have sought to enhance women’s role in policy-making. These organizations have emphasized the need for equal opportunity and various action strategies by reforming and removing structural barriers to women’s entry into positions of elected and appointed office.
This book explores various aspects of continuity and change in the status of women in Thai politics by examining the various forms of women’s political participation and activism in Thailand in a systematic way. To date, the literature on politics in Thailand has said little about women. While in the past, scholars of Thai politics have been attracted to the country’s democratization, almost no attention has been given to the role of women in the politics of Thailand. The political participation of women has been neglected in the Thai case, even though their visibility on the political arena has increased in recent years.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

In a study of public attitudes towards gender roles in 70 nations, Inglehart and Norris (2003) argue that the existence of differences in cultural attitudes towards gender equality among nations vary according to their level of human development. Human development plays an important role in advancing the position of women by facilitating more egalitarian attitudes toward women in a society. In general, the people in more affluent, post-industrial societies are much more likely to support gender equality than the people in less affluent, agrarian countries. Levels of human development seem to be one of the most important determinants in predicting attitudes towards the division of sex roles (Inglehart & Norris 2003: 43). Economic and social transformation facilitates the development of more egalitarian attitudes toward women. This process – particularly the pace of cultural change – is however ‘mediated by religious legacies, historical traditions, and institutional structures in each country’ (Inglehart and Norris 2003: 149).

According to the UN’s Human Development Report 2006, Thailand’s ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI) (the progress of nations based on three basic dimensions of human development, namely life expectancy, educational achievement, and standard of living) is 74, out of 177 countries. Thailand is placed at number 58 on the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), which measures development in the same basic capabilities as the
HDI does, but takes account of inequality in achievement between women and men. The gap between men and women is not large in terms of life expectancy, education, and standard of living. For the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which evaluates progress in advancing women's standing in political and economic spheres, Thailand ranked 60th. GEM incorporates the percentage of women occupying administrative and managerial posts, working in professional and technical occupations and holding seats in Parliament, as well as their level of earned income relative to men. Thailand scores higher on the GEM index than on the HDI. In spite of this, its GEM rank is still lower than those of a number of other countries in Asia, such as Singapore (18), the Philippines (45), and Malaysia (55). Thailand has much work to do on women’s political and economic integration and gender equality.

DEMOCRACY AND GENDER EQUALITY

Studies of democratization in Thailand have generally overlooked the role of women almost entirely. The evidence tends to suggest that the types of political systems that seem to affect gender equality and opportunities for women’s access to the political arena are greater in a democratic system than in an authoritarian one. The democratic system is organized in a manner which encourages political participation, diversity of opinion and the accountability of government. Policy-making is influenced by the preferences of a variety of actors. Inglehart, Norris and Welzel (2003) believe that although democracy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for gender equality, it is a significant facilitating factor. Gender equality in elected offices goes hand in hand with the proportion of women in Parliament. After surveying almost 70 societies containing 80 per cent of the world’s population, Inglehart, Norris and Welzel found that democratic societies tend to have more women in Parliament than undemocratic societies. There are various explanations for why gender equality in elected office is likely to go with democracy. One plausible explanation focuses on the importance of economic development. In the 1960s and early 1970s, there was widespread support among scholars
for the idea that economic development is conducive to democracy and women’s political participation (Arat 1988; Inglehart and Norris 2003). It was assumed that socio-economic modernization would bring about rising educational levels, occupational specialization and greater affluence, which in turn would lead to equality for women who have been oppressed by patriarchal structures. In their cross-national comparisons, Inglehart and Norris (2003) found support for the proposition that levels of economic development are associated with attitudes towards traditional or egalitarian roles for women and men. Affluent nations are more egalitarian in their attitudes toward gender roles than less affluent nations. Moreover, they argued that economic growth is only part of the explanation: significant changes in values, beliefs and attitudes are also necessary to bolster women’s role in politics and society. Another study shows that socio-economic development leads to an increased number of qualified women candidates seeking office (Matland and Montgomery 2003).

Political Development
Since the issue of gender equality is closely linked with the process of democratization, it is important to explore Thailand’s political development. Thailand provides a historical example of a country that started a process of democratic transition and then reverted to authoritarianism. One of the main reasons for this failure was the strong authoritarian and anti-popular bias built into Thailand’s basic political institutions by a series of constitutions that created a powerful but irresponsible cabinet system of government, an equally irresponsible and powerful military apparatus, and an elitist bureaucracy. There are various reasons why the consolidation of democracy in Thailand has been difficult to achieve. Democratization in Thailand is affected by many problems including those related to the continuing importance of the military within the state, weaknesses in party and representation systems, political corruption, and widening social inequalities.

Thailand’s political tradition has been turbulent. The country has undergone numerous regime changes since the beginning of
Introduction: Women's Political Representation from an International Perspective

costitutional monarchy in 1932. Following this abolition of absolute monarchy, the political arena was dominated for a half century by the military and bureaucratic elite. Regime changes were to a large extent brought about by a long series of coups. There have been 16 constitutions and 23 military coups and coup attempts since Thailand first embarked on the path to democracy in 1932. The military coup that took place on 19 September 2006 against the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was the latest in a series of setbacks for Thailand since a ‘people power’ movement toppled the authoritarian leaders in 1992. It exposed the shallow roots of the democratic institutions that grew in the shadow of past military regimes.

The path to democracy in Thailand has not been a straight one. Indeed, a quick glance at Thailand’s political development over the last 70 years shows a zigzagging pattern of an authoritarian regime followed by a period of openness to liberal and democratic ideas and then back to authoritarian rule. Many other countries in the developing world have followed a similar course, exposed to the competing pressures of external democratic models from the West, but few have done so with the intensity experienced by Thailand. If one looks back over Thailand’s political development since 1932, one dominant theme appears to characterize the political arena, namely, the struggle between the authoritarian tradition and the more liberal forces that stood for some form of democracy and parliamentary government. Until the late 1980s, the authoritarian forces held the advantage, but the opposition was never overcome: liberal groups won some battles but they did not succeed in altering the terms of political competition to their advantage. The democratic opposition displayed an amazing capacity to survive. There was an incremental conditioning of the Thai people in at least some of the basic institutions of democracy. In the early 1990s, therefore, Thailand entered a period of democratic reform with a heritage of some useful political experience. Because of the dominance of the military in Thai politics, women’s political participation had been very limited. Women’s active participation in politics was also extremely limited not exclu-
sively due to legal and institutional barriers but also to social and cultural obstacles.

*Thai Women Mobilizing to Shape Democracy*

For many years, people in Thailand had been calling for a fundamental restructuring of their political system. Significant progress towards the democratization of the political system has taken place since 1992. Women became visible and mobilized as part of the democratization in Thailand. A notable feature of women’s associational activity in the 1990s has been the central role women have played in the process of democratization. Indeed, women’s groups were very active in the reform movement that culminated in the new constitution in 1997, which sought to throw off the last vestiges of authoritarian rule and to assert democracy in the country. Transitions to democratic forms of government in Thailand enabled women to claim space for gender equality in reformed institutions.

In 1997, Thailand entered a new era of democratic development. Democratization raised expectations for the adoption of new political agenda and increased political representation for women. The constitution did bring some significant political changes and a notable development of democracy. The major reform programs of the constitution in 1997 were not created out of thin air. They had been under consideration for some time, especially following the events that took place in May 1992, when massive demonstrations resulted in the massacre of civilian protestors by the military. During the process of drafting the new constitution, women’s organizations played an important role in the inclusion of gender equality in the constitution (Connors 2002). In a sense, the 1995 Beijing Conference served as an essential catalyst for the formation of an alliance of women’s organizations to press for gender equality in the constitution. In their struggle for equality, many women’s groups made efforts to create a nationwide movement that could effectively further their demands. The women’s movement in Thailand emphasized the need for equal opportunity and an increased presence of women in politics facilitated by the removal of institutional and structural
Introduction: Women’s Political Representation from an International Perspective

barriers, and changing the rules of the political game. Building alliances with other women across areas of activity gave women an opportunity to improve their political position and gain influence in the process of drafting the constitution. There was a tremendous response to the call for an alliance among women’s organizations. The establishment of the Women and Constitution Network was perhaps the most vivid illustration of this increasing political presence. Women are becoming a political force to be reckoned with. The Women and Constitution Network, consisting of many women’s organizations, was established to lobby for reforms to address legal inequities in the treatment of women. It played a key role in securing the inclusion of gender equality clauses in legislation – including an article that stipulates that one third of the members of the National Commission on Human Rights be women – and creating new government organizations (mandated by the 1997 Constitution).

The influence of women-oriented NGOs in Thailand is unique. Barriers that hold women back from the political scene also prevent women from participating in the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Women have, however, been able to make headway in these organizations since the issues addressed often fall within the field of soft issues, i.e. areas by tradition belonging to the female domain. Women’s organizations have taken practical initiatives, such as the creation of an eligibility pool, to enhance women’s position in Thai society.

The 1997 Constitution clearly marked a historic turning point in the evolution of Thai politics. The constitution was a mixture of many conflicting ideas, but it turned out to be a reasonably successful balance among the diverse political forces of the time. It was a historical landmark, and bears the hallmarks of the new age in its content. Virada Somswasdi claims that the constitution was ‘the product of the women’s movement’ (Somswasdi 2003: 4). One of the important areas in which this is most apparent is gender equality. The transition to democracy opened up new opportunities for gains in political rights and civil liberties. The 1997 Constitution had six gender-related articles designed to provide women with equal rights.
and protections, including a provision on protection from domestic violence. It contained the guarantee of gender equality, thus affording protection against discrimination on the basis of sex.

In the first Senate election of 2000 and the first Lower House election in 2001, there was a noticeable decline in the representation of officials (military officers and bureaucrats) and a corresponding increase in the percentage of legislators with a professional or economic background. It seemed that the pendulum was not likely to swing back to anything resembling the preceding period of military rule, however the 19 September 2006 military coup in Thailand abruptly ended the 15-year trajectory of democracy and the pendulum has swung back once again. The coup leaders repealed the constitution, abolished the popularly elected national Parliament, declared martial law, and issued several decrees limiting civil liberties.

OBSTACLES TO WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

In Thailand, the obstacles that women encounter in politics are many. These include structural, institutional, political, and cultural factors. Many of the studies in the field of women and politics in Western democracies have focused on the impact of electoral systems on women’s political representation. Most research aiming at explaining the relationship between electoral systems and women’s likelihood of being elected has concentrated on the differences between plurality single-member-district-systems and proportional representation (PR). There is a relatively strong scholarly consensus that the electoral system does have a significant impact on women’s representation in legislatures. Many previous studies show that PR party list systems are most female-friendly and that plurality single-member-district-systems consistently prove less favourable to the election of women (Lakeman 1994; Rule 1987; Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Matland 1993; Matland and Studlar 1996). The common explanation is that in party list PR systems, parties are more willing to add women to balance the list of candidates in an effort to broaden their appeal among voters. It is interesting to note here that women’s representation in Thailand is an exception to the conventional wisdom
Introduction: Women’s Political Representation from an International Perspective

containing the relationship between electoral systems and female representation. Contrary to Western experience, proportional representation did not promote the election of Thai women to the House of Representatives. In fact, the relationship between proportional representation and female representation in Thailand was negative in the sense that more women were elected in the plurality tier than the PR tier of Thailand’s mixed electoral system.

There is also an increasing amount of research on other institutional, structural and political factors as determinants of female representation. They include district magnitude (the number of seats assigned to each electoral district), legislative turnover, the costs of electoral campaigns, party competition, the strength of left-wing parties, and the attitudes of party gatekeepers (Rule 1987; Norris 1993; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994). Some found socio-economic factors to be significant in explaining women’s political participation. Higher educational levels and female labour participation rates, high levels of socio-economic development, and the strength of the women’s movement are said to influence the participation of women in political life positively (Reynolds 1999; Inglehart and Norris 2003). All these factors may affect the number of female aspirants and the demands of party gatekeepers and voters. In this context it should be highlighted that theories developed in the West may not be able to assist us significantly in understanding the various obstacles facing women in Thailand. In his comparative study of women’s legislative representation in developed and developing countries, Matland (1998) argued that none of the factors found to be significant in industrialized democracies were found to have a significant effect on women’s representation in less developed countries. Due to the influence of culture and patriarchal structures it stands to reason that the critical mass theory alone will not further gender equality. Factors that have proved significant in this context include gender stereotypes, ‘double-binding’ and several gender barriers.

Gender stereotypes

How important is the role of culture compared with structural, institutional and political factors in accounting for the continued lack
of gender equality in higher leadership positions in Thailand? An increasing number of studies argue that cultural factors play an important role in determining women’s access to political power. Inglehart and Norris (2003: 127), for example, argue that culture, including traditional attitudes toward women leaders, has a significant influence on the proportion of women in elected office. Culture works as a control mechanism for social, structural and political institutions.

Traditional gender stereotypes have often been thought to present barriers to women’s political representation. As the evidence from the World Values Surveys, a world-wide investigation of socio-cultural and political change, clearly shows that in many countries, especially in the developing world, there is still a deep-rooted belief that men make better political leaders than women. This belief has important political consequences in that it has a significant impact on the proportion of women elected to office. In societies where the public holds the idea that men make better leaders than women, relatively low proportions of women get elected to Parliament. Cultural factors may have greater influence than democratic institutions and economic development on the percentage of women in Parliament (Inglehart, Norris and Welzel 2003). Cultural legacies and religious traditions continue to exert a strong influence on attitudes toward gender roles (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

The Thai social context contains deeply rooted gender stereotypes, which create many obstacles for women who try to carve out a place for themselves in the political arena. Stereotypes are used to create a more manageable picture of a complex reality, and can be described as cognitive structures made up of knowledge, concepts and expectations that an individual has concerning members of a specific group, such as women. Stereotypes affect how an individual handles information, what is noticed, how the information is interpreted, which conclusions are drawn, which judgments are made and what is remembered. Individuals can seek out and take notice of such information that correlates to their prejudicial concepts (Riggle et al. 1997). Stereotypes always involve an element of over-generalization. They create an image of not only how a certain group – such as female politicians – behaves, but also how they ought to behave.
Existing components in the Thai culture contribute to the marginalization of women in politics. Cultural elements that favour men as political leaders and simultaneously rob women of that role exist in other cultures as well. In order to discuss gender differences in Thai politics, we must first discuss what cultural assumptions underlie gender in Thai society. Women politicians in Thailand operate in an unfavourable cultural context, as the spheres of politics allocated to women are conditioned by stereotypes.

Despite great industrial and technological development in recent decades, traditional views about women's suitability for political office seem to persist in Thailand. The nation's development process has a thick overlay of culture and historical experience that sets it apart from the corresponding experiences of some other countries in Asia. Cultural factors play an important role in the low number of women in elected and appointed office in Thailand. Fundamental belief structures, articulated to some extent as religious beliefs, in the Thai culture have placed women on the margins of the political world. These belief structures can be seen as gender lenses through which Thai people view their world, framing male experience as the norm.

As noted previously, the roots of these belief structures can be traced to Buddhism. The traditional structure on which contemporary Thai society rests has its roots in its religion. Buddhism has played an important role in shaping gender-relations (Lindberg Falk 2008). The Thai version of Brahmanism still defines women's roles and positions at both societal and state levels within Thailand's traditional social order. Buddhism provides 'a moral framework for men's hierarchical precedence over women' (Lindberg Falk 2002: 104). The norm of andro-centrism or 'male-centeredness' has framed gender expectations throughout Buddhist history (Lindberg Falk 2008; Gross 1999). This norm is deeply embedded in Thai cultural assumptions and has discouraged women from entering the political arena.

In her research on gender-lenses in the West, Sandra Bem (1993) contends that hidden assumptions (gender lenses) about gender roles in the political process remain deeply ingrained in a culture
– those of andro-centrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism. Looking through these lenses of gender perpetuates male power in two ways: through enculturation and internalization and by the channelling of females and males into different and unequal life situations. This channelling takes place in discourse and within the institutions in which these lenses are embedded, so we are able to look at them rather than through them. Andro-centrism, the first of these lenses, refers to male-centeredness whereby the male experience is considered normative. That which is not the norm is a deviation, consequently females are a deviation. Since the males are the centre of the culture through this lens, everything is defined in terms of similarities and dissimilarities to men, thereby making the male experience the reference point for the culture. As the deviation, or ‘other’, women are defined in terms of their relationships to men. This view suggests that women are different from, and inferior to, men. It accepts male dominance and assertiveness as the norm (Bem 1993).

The second lens of gender that shapes how people interpret and communicate their social reality, according to Bem (1993), is gender polarization. It deals with distinctions between male and female. Gender polarization is the process of organizing social life to the extent that people and ways of viewing the world are dichotomized, with sex used as a major organizing principle (Bem 1993). It creates meaning for what it means to be male and female in society. That is, male-female distinctions are relevant to all aspects of life. Women are assumed to fulfil a certain role in society and act according to a social script set out for them. Although it is increasingly becoming acceptable for women to violate these gender norms, culture in the West still views women and men through a lens of gender polarization. Bem suggests that a gendered personality and identity equates to different and unequal roles for males and females. Men construct their identities around dominance and females construct their identities around deference. Masculinity is defined by task-oriented, problem-solving traits and femininity is defined by expressive traits. Males communicate assertively, while females communicate gently.
Those who deviate from the scripts for being male and female are regarded as abnormal (Bem 1993).

The third lens of biological essentialism, according to Bem (1993), shapes the perception of ‘male-female’ difference as a natural consequence of biology, and leads to the inference that male dominance is natural. The idea of biological essentialism has been used to rationalize and legitimize the status quo between the sexes. The danger inherent in this lens is that by claiming a scientific basis for our assumptions about gender roles, the biases that already exist in a society are strengthened.

These three gender lenses pervasive in the West also influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in Thai politics and society. Bem’s concept of the lenses of gender highlights the basic assumptions of Thai culture that place women at a disadvantage in the public sphere. The underlying assumptions are that women and men are opposites, men are the dominant and superior gender, and that these conditions are the natural order of things.

‘Double-binding’
As in many other countries, female politicians in Thailand often end up in the gender trap. Female candidates who have run for the House of Representatives and the Senate recently have waged increasingly combative election campaigns in which they have displayed their toughness and, to a certain extent, aggressiveness. If they express themselves too confidently or aggressively, they are accused of being gruff and unfeminine. If, on the other hand, they use a softer mode of expression, which is traditionally associated with women and is often labelled as ‘feminine’, they are considered to be irresolute, not tough enough or simply not credible. Female politicians appear to be victims of contradictory demands from the Thai people, who seem to have lower expectations of their competence and higher expectations of their unimpeachable moral standing. Therefore, female contenders in the political arena have less leeway for failure and are judged more harshly if they act in a way that is considered improper. The women who do succeed in politics are scrutinized through dif-
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...entered lenses from those used for successful men. No matter which way they decide to act, they can become the object of criticism. It is indeed difficult for Thai women to make the transition from the private to the public domain. To be a woman and a politician in the stage of political development that Thailand currently finds itself in is far too difficult and not worth the effort, as stated by several female Members of Parliament I interviewed.

It is important to take note of the differences between men’s and women’s styles of communication when studying women’s political rhetoric and to be aware of the mixed messages that female politicians must face today. While they must present their message effectively, they must be careful to not seem too unfeminine. Women in leading political positions are faced with a true challenge when they must meet the contradictory demands that are placed on them. Female politicians require considerable skill in order to balance between a mode of expression that is stereotypically too feminine and thereby jeopardize being taken seriously and being considered too manly and aggressive if they express themselves more powerfully.

In Thailand there are still expectations that female politicians ought not to stray too far from the traditional female role. A female politician in Thailand frequently faces the dilemma of what she wants to convey to her voters; that she is not only a competitive career woman and tough enough to manage the rough and tumble world of politics but also a homemaker, concerned about her home and family. Also writing on Thailand, Doney remarks that ‘when women voiced political demands, they were branded as unwomanly and accused of endangering the unity of the family’ (2002: 167).

Double-binding is a concept that was originally coined by the psychologist Gregory Bateson and his colleagues (1956). The term describes a strategy that has been used by the strong against the weak. Women have often been at an unfair disadvantage and victims of double-binding, subjected to contradictory demands. In order to reach success in the public and political domains, qualities such as aggressiveness and determination are required, but if a woman shows these qualities she is judged to be unfeminine. If, on the other hand,
she demonstrates feminine characteristics such as docility and sensitivity, she will never succeed in the world of public affairs. In other words, she finds herself in a ‘catch 22’ situation. No matter how she acts, she gets caught in the gender trap (Jamieson 1995). Double-binding constitutes an obstacle for women, effectively preventing them from acting on the same premises as men in the public sector.

Gender Barriers
Gender barriers, which appear in different forms in the Thai culture, limit women’s abilities to make their voices heard on the public political scene. The first barrier is that in the Thai socio-cultural world of thought, women have been viewed stereotypically as either more moral than men or as ruled more by emotion than by reason, and they are thereby not suitable to participate in the public and political domains. Women legislators also like to picture themselves as honest politicians or moral guardians in a dirty political world dominated by men. In their campaigns for the Senate in 2000 and the House of Representatives in 2001, female candidates often capitalized on this image by turning it to their advantage, emphasizing that women are less likely to get involved in corruption and dirty political games than men. In the words of one woman politician: ‘women are more honest and more women in politics would help eliminate corruption in Thai politics.’ In sum, since women are seen as more moral, they are deemed unfit for the ‘dirty’ world of politics and as they are governed too much by their emotions they are deemed unfit to be political leaders.

The second gender barrier that contributes to the strengthening of the first one, is the notion that men and women belong in separate spheres of activity: women’s role is limited to the private domain and the public domain is male territory. This boundary, which effectively excludes women from the political arena, creates a marked divider between the public and private domains. In Thai society, the involvement of women in the spheres of politics has traditionally been perceived as unnatural, not only by the general electorate but by women themselves. It is quite common to see politics and women
constructed as each others’ antithesis. Women have a negative image of politics, regarding it as ‘dirty’ and remote from their concerns. Politics is represented as an arena of dishonesty in which politicians are acting in their own interests and do not shy away from bribery or corruption. Women often symbolize the opposite of dirty politics, not only in the self-conceptions of women politicians but also in expressions of popular culture. Female politicians and the general electorate often call for the participation of women in politics, because of their supposed moral superiority and their cleansing influence on politics. The supposed antithesis of women to politics significantly affects women’s relation to the political domain. Underlying the representation of women and politics as each other’s antithesis is the divide between the private and the public sphere. These gender barriers undermine women’s role as politicians and public figures and their ability to have their arguments heard.

The influence of the patriarchal culture in which Thai Buddhism has defined women’s role, reinforced by the legal and institutional framework and the restriction of less egalitarian attitudes toward women’s political role, has resulted in a significantly decreased number of women involved in political life. Throughout the history of Thai culture, two beliefs about men and women have prevailed: that women are the inferior sex and that men and women are fundamentally different psychologically and sexually. Both male dominance and male-female differences have also been conceived in religious terms. Buddhism has legitimized the ideology of women’s subordination (Darunee 1997). Women in Thailand today, as in many other Asian countries, still live in the shadow of a tradition of female subordination and the rigid division between public and private emanating from Brahmanism.

In my interviews with female parliamentarians, several of them expressed that in the Thai society there are deeply rooted preconceptions about gender, which creates many obstacles for women who try to carve out a place for themselves in the political arena. As in the Western philosophical tradition, the worlds of women and men in Thailand are clearly delineated. Men have been associated with
the public world and women have been associated with the private world - that of the household. In Thai society, these associations are pervasive especially in politics. The identification of separate spheres for private and public activity is basic to Thai Buddhism shaped by Brahmanism. The tradition of women's subordination and their difficulty in entering into the public world of politics in Thailand is a cultural legacy of the Ayutthya period (1350-1767) with its emphasis on warrior's virtues and the spread of patriarchal Brahminist beliefs (Klausner 2000: 68).

Women's Strategies
How do Thai women in politics cope with the gender barriers? In order to answer the question, the three strategies identified by Sullivan & Turner (1996) will be used as a backdrop. Although their work is about the strategies developed by women in politics responding to gender barriers in the Western context, it can form a framework to examine the strategies used by Thai women in the political arena. Women can use three different strategies to overcome the limitations set forth by gender barriers. They can deny that these barriers exist, they can adapt to the existing framework, or, being aware of the existence of these barriers, they can attempt to change them (Sullivan & Turner 1996).

Women who deny the existence of gender barriers believe that they will be successful if they follow the rules set out by the existing system. Those in denial refuse to recognise that they are constrained by barriers: women and men act as if they were starting from a position of equality. Ignoring the constraints placed on women in a patriarchal society will not make them go away. The result of this strategy is that the woman in question will be discounted whether or not she acknowledges the existence of a barrier (Sullivan & Turner 1996).

While some women deny the existence of barriers when attempting to enter the political world, other women recognise barriers to their participation in the political domain as though they are capable of circumventing them. Confronting and accommodating is the second strategy. Although confronting and accommodating appear to
be separate strategies, women in politics often use them in combination with each other, so these two are treated as one. Women who confront the boundaries ‘find their voices outside of governmental politics’ (Sullivan and Turner 1996: 47). When women accommodate the boundaries, however, they limit themselves and exclude themselves from political success. As Sullivan and Turner (1996: 48) argue, ‘[w]hen women rely upon this strategy, they overlook the power of double binds.’ Women who make use of this strategy are faced with a no-win situation, because to challenge the boundaries will exclude them from the political arena and to accommodate the boundary will disempower them in the political arena. Thus, women would not appear in public at all if they chose to adapt themselves completely to the female role which is restricted to the private domain. But when put into practice, adaptation varies significantly. Women who recognize the double binds develop a rhetorical strategy in response to these double binds. Many female politicians try to communicate in a more masculine, rational way without losing their traditional feminine demeanour. When a woman adapts, she is conscious of the fact that the political game is unfair, but feels that she can succeed if only she is able to find the right strategy when faced with different situations. Women who deny the existence of gender barriers, however, act as though the political game were fair. In both cases there is a tacit acceptance of the status quo that the game is played according to male values.

Users of the third strategy, however, refuse to work within the established framework and strive to revise the barriers, trying to introduce new values in the public discourse (Sullivan & Turner 1996). These ‘revisionists’ realize that it is men who possess the interpretative precedence in politics and that this must be changed. They feel that a change in the rules of the political game will affect political decision-making, allowing for consideration of the value of women and other groups that have been marginalized.

When one studies women’s political representation in Thailand, one must take into consideration the gender barriers mentioned above and the different strategies that women use to handle them. These
barriers are present in different instances in society and manifest as obstacles for women who aspire to a place in the political decision-making process. The women I interviewed took several approaches to the constraints placed upon them by gender barriers and made use of different rhetorical strategies to respond to the barriers. Indeed, my interviews with politicians and others who are knowledgeable and closely involved in the question of women’s participation and representation in Thailand convinced me that women in politics use each of these three strategies to deal with the barriers.

Overview of Other Chapters in This Volume
Juree Vichit-Vadakan’s chapter provides a socio-cultural analysis of women in politics in the Thai context. This is an examination of the socio-cultural factors that influence politics, which in its turn dictate the rules, conditions, parameters and processes of decision-making. The patron-client structure of traditional Thai society lives on in contemporary Thailand. Personalism and personal ties are supreme to all other concerns. Personalistic linkages are generally male-created and male-based, which leaves women at a great disadvantage. Men want to elevate family status and the ultimate political goal involves power, prestige, position and privilege. Women’s goals are different since they, in their traditional role of homemaker, have a more pragmatic and practical experience of things.

Obvious barriers to women who pursue politics are stereotypes of women as weak, indecisive and emotional – a self-fulfilling prophecy. Another obstacle to women is their low self-esteem, to which media often contributes by claiming that women do not assert themselves. Leadership figures in society tend to be male, which provides a distorted picture for young girls. Political parties lack gender awareness and gender sensitivity and women are reluctant to spend the amount of money that is generally required for political success, and finally, there is little solidarity or sisterhood among Thai women. On a more positive note, however, women also have many strengths: with less inflated egos they are excellent mediators. The foundation of gender inequality will not be solved by the mere increase in the number of women in politics.
Women and Politics in Thailand

The chapter entitled ‘NGO Advocacy for Women in Politics in Thailand’ by Suteera Vichitranonda and Meytinee Bhongsavej gives a substantive account of how NGOs can and have influenced gender equality and female representation in Thai politics. NGOs are motivated by the fact that a dynamic society must be equally represented, as in a dynamic democracy. NGOs are needed to increase representation of women in Thai politics since the bureaucracy has made no attempts to train women to assume political posts even though the laws changed to allow women in such positions.

The authors of this chapter refer to different kinds of NGOs and discuss NGOs’ work on the societal, institutional and individual levels. On the societal level, efforts have been made to raise public awareness and to change public attitudes, in part by rewarding women in recognition of their different contributions and by creating an eligibility pool. NGOs have also utilized the media in very effective ways for these purposes. On the institutional level NGOs have worked to advocate the integration of so-called female concerns into the policies of the political parties with campaigns to put pressure on political parties. Training women at the local level to run in elections has been a great focus since politics is more accessible at this level and will strengthen the very foundation of democracy.

Findings in this chapter emphasize the need for monitoring mechanisms, which have been set up by some NGOs. It is also important that both positive and negative experiences be documented to avoid repeating mistakes and to pursue the paths that will be effective. The authors conclude that equal political participation should start with the educational system, and that changing the pre-conceived images of women is crucial since quantity is not enough.

Cambria G. Hamburg’s chapter ‘Barriers and Strategies in Women’s NGO Work in Isaan, North-Eastern Thailand’ is a case study of different structures in NGOs and grass-roots civil society associations. NGOs work closely within communities, which produce social hierarchies and such NGOs have potential to uphold unequal gender-relations or reform them.
Introduction: Women’s Political Representation from an International Perspective

Growth and key developments within the NGOs in focus have followed from the 1976 October massacre, the international women’s movement and the economic crisis in 1997. There is a difference between rural and urban NGO-based movements: NGOs in the cities tend to focus on women’s issues while rural NGOs incorporate women’s issues in the overall project. NGOs in Thailand can be divided into three different categories, welfare-oriented, neutral-based associations and high-profile activist work.

Culture and stereotyped attitudes present obstacles to women working in NGOs. Away from their family, women are sensitive to accusations of sexual affairs and adultery, and many women prefer to not expose their families to such public embarrassment. The structure of Thai society can be found in the tradition of leaving land rights and the house to the daughters and moveable capital to the sons. As such, women’s involvement in certain issues is more accepted than others. When women act in the capacity of mothers, wives and defenders of the family they are able to take strong leadership positions.

Juree Vichit-Vadakan’s second chapter in this volume provides ‘A Glimpse of Women Leaders in Thai Local Politics’ by studying the specific experiences of certain successful women in Thai local politics. At the beginning of the chapter the author accounts for previous studies in this subject. The focus in this study is to determine whether or not women’s role and participation in local politics can be understood and analysed. Something she points out is the need to study the women who failed and why they failed.

Certain characteristics can be distinguished from the profiles of women in local politics. These women usually entered politics after their children were grown and had great support from their families, including financially. All of them had been active as informal leaders in societal projects prior to election. Of most interest is their way of networking and building alliances, using a horizontal approach instead of the traditional vertical top-down structure. The latter structure is dominant among men and certainly has not served women in their work. Juree Vichit-Vadakan believes that the hori-
horizontal approach to politics is more conductive to the development of true democracy in Thailand.

The chapter called ‘Women as Parliamentarians’ is an examination of whether an increase in women’s representation in Parliament will really make a difference in terms of policy priorities. The author, Kazuki Iwanaga, describes critical mass theory and situates it in the context of women Thai parliamentarians and the developments seen in the post-industrialized democracies of Europe and the United States, with a focus on women’s substantive representation.

Some of the motives women expressed in interviews as to why they entered politics included a sense of public service and/or political ties in the family. These women felt that compared with men, women politicians make more responsible choices, conceptualize issues and policy problems more inclusively and have a different approach to problem-solving.

Many women in politics come from the same background as men although more women have family ties to politics, and women’s policy agendas were rather similar to that of their male colleagues. A difference in background between men and women that can be identified is that men had usually worked in the bureaucracy or in the business sphere, while women came from more civic-oriented fields like that of NGOs or community volunteer. Women’s inexperience in politics presents significant limitations, including in the area of party discipline. Men’s and women’s representation on committees is tied to their interests and their expertise, with women overrepresented in the traditional domains.

Supin Kachacupt’s chapter entitled ‘Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy’ is a case study of women civil servants’ opportunities for advancement and participation in the public service of Thailand. The author explains some significant developments in previous constitutions that have set the parameters women in the civil service have to work within. It is on this basis that the author makes a statistical investigation of the number of women permanent civil servants on different levels in the bureaucracy. The purpose of the chapter is to understand the underlying factors that
create gaps in status between male and female bureaucrats, the critical obstacles to women’s advancement and representation, what can be done to decrease these gaps, and whether equal representation pushes women’s issues into the limelight.

Even though the Constitution of 1997 – the first ‘People’s Constitution’ – gave no explicit provisions for gender equality, it called for the equal treatment of all citizens. Social values, however, present a significant obstacle to women’s advancement in the Thai bureaucracy. Despite there being a sufficient number of educated women, they do not have equal representation and very few make it to more important decision-making positions, which is crucial for gender equality. There is a need for more concrete laws that will actually lead to arrangements for laws to function in the real world.

The chapter called ‘Political Participation of Thai Middle-Class Women’ deals with women’s political behaviour based on several socio-economic factors: age, educational level, marital status, occupation, income, number of children, club memberships and exposure to the media. The higher their age, education and exposure to news, the more likely women are to participate in politics. In this chapter, Amporn W. Tamronglak and Tongchai Wongchaisuwan have made an in-depth investigation of what factors influence women’s voting behaviour.

Since women in Thailand have no history of a common struggle for gender equality women have been slow to appreciate their roles as voters, confined within the perspective of the male hegemony. Urbanization and migration have changed the framework of family life and both husband and wife may have to work outside the home. More highly educated people did not feel that their education had helped them become more informed voters, mainly because of corruption. Poor legitimacy can explain why the elected governments have been so volatile.

Many Thais vote because of a sense of moral obligation. The Constitution of 1997 tried to reduce vote-buying by stipulating that it was every citizen’s duty to vote. Young people are more concerned with global issues that they find cannot be solved by the traditional
Women and Politics in Thailand

forum for politics, and their participation in politics takes place on another arena: in the new social movements.

‘My Story’ is Supatra Masdit’s personal story about her experiences of Thai political society, from childhood and onwards. Her father was a journalist before he became a politician in the struggle for democracy and she grew up in an environment where her father urged her to use sound argument and with the understanding that she was no different from boys. When she first encountered gender discrimination, she had no problems arguing her case. At university, studying mass communication, she took part in student activities and social development volunteer programs. It was during this time she came to understand the hardships of rural life and developed a life-long commitment to social issues.

While Masdit was in Hawaii studying for her Master’s degree, the democratic government in which her father held a ministerial post was overthrown and there was a violent massacre of student activists. This had a profound effect on her commitment to democracy. When she came home she took her father’s place in the Democrat Party and during her entire political career she has made great efforts to stay close to her roots. With the support of her father she became the second female Member of Parliament. As a parliamentarian Supatra Masdit understood that women are held to much higher moral codes than men and that lack of training is one reason for the small amount of women in Thai politics, so she took the initiative to train women and to help orient those who were elected, no matter their party affiliation. When she became the first female government minister she realized how much influence people in high decision-making positions have and the importance of getting more women into such positions.

REFERENCES


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CHAPTER TWO

Women in Politics and Women and Politics: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Thai Context

JUREE VICHIT-VADAKAN

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the majority of countries in Asia and the Pacific, women in Thailand are visible in most spheres of society. Women participate in the economy, in the public sector, in the micro-economic sector and in small businesses, as well as in medium-sized and big businesses. Thai women work as professionals and are active in the academic world (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2). However, presence and participation alone do not necessarily mean that women's status needs no further improvement or that Thailand has already achieved gender equality. On the contrary, in most spheres of activity, women can be the backbone of organizations but they are rarely found at the apex or at top decision-making levels in their organization. In politics especially, one finds that women are grossly under-represented at all levels: national, provincial, municipal and local (Tambon Administrative Organizations).

This chapter intends to draw a distinction between formal politics (electoral politics and party politics) and informal politics. Informal politics entails the competition and allocation of interest and resources among concerned individuals and parties in everyday life. According to Lasswell (1958) politics essentially dictates the rules, conditions, parameters and processes of decision-making in
### Table 2.1: Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) ranking of key countries – total and disaggregated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seats in parliament held by women</th>
<th>Female administrators and managers</th>
<th>Female professional and technical workers</th>
<th>Estimated female earned income</th>
<th>Ratio of female earned income to male earned income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- rank</td>
<td>% - rank</td>
<td>% - rank</td>
<td>% - rank</td>
<td>PPP US$ - rank - ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sweden</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>1. Luxembourg 33,517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rwanda</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>2. Norway 31,356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Denmark</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>3. USA 27,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103. Hungary</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>50. Chile 5,442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104. Sudan</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>51. Uruguay 5,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105. Venezuela</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>52. Botswana 5,353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106. Thailand</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>53. Thailand 5,284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>163. United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>84. Fiji</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>153. Sierra Leone 337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women in Politics and Women and Politics

Table 2.2: Women in the civil service, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades 1–7</th>
<th>Number of men</th>
<th>Number of women</th>
<th>% women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>133,869</td>
<td>211,210</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>8,778</td>
<td>5,944</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total grades 9–11</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total civil service</td>
<td>143,043</td>
<td>217,254</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


terms of who gets what, where, when and how. If politics concerning women were defined more broadly, it would include women’s role in formal as well as informal politics, including decision-making and control over their everyday lives.

This chapter argues that in both formal and informal politics in Thailand, dominant socio-cultural factors play an important and decisive role in shaping women’s and men’s perceptions, thinking, values and beliefs about politics, which result in a set of behaviours vis-à-vis politics.

Social Structural Continuity

Traditional Thai society was organized in a patron–client structure with vertical, social affiliations. The patron protected his clients and the clients showed loyalty and obedience to the patron (Hanks 1962; Akin 1969). The bond between the high-status patron and his lower-status clients was cemented by mutual benefits and personal concerns. Since this model is still present contemporary Thai society, political parties and other social groupings are organized according to the same principle, with high-status leaders and lower-status followers. Personalism, or relationships based on personal ties, is supreme to all other concerns, hence relations between leaders and followers are highly personal and non-universal. Thai political parties are generally an amalgamation of various vertical patron-client
relationships, which are vertically linked to the top leader who serves as the supreme patron to all. This system, fluid as it may seem, contains a critical time dimension of patron-client history. People who are linked together at the primary level are the closest. At the secondary and tertiary levels, the bonds become somewhat weaker. Being highly personal, relationships based on long-term mutual benefits or ‘debts of gratitude’ tend to outlast linkages of shorter duration.

In this kind of context, women are unquestionably disadvantaged, as personalistic linkages are generally male-created and male-based, with women at best becoming part of the system by virtue of being wife, daughter or sister to those men who are directly involved in the patron-client structure. Such bonds and linkages are, however, considered to be outside the general private/domestic/internal domain of women, hence as Thai women enter politics by way of legacy, their places in the intricate web and layers of patron-client systems are never natural, unquestioned, unchallenged or totally safe.

**Professed vs. Latent Goals in Politics**

Why do men and women seek political office? What does politics mean to those who seek office? Is there a gender difference? Have there been changes over time? These are interesting and intriguing questions. We know that women did not have access to politics or formal positions of power in the past, whilst men did.

In the current context, politicians explain their motivations for being in politics as including a desire to serve the people, to help the poor and disadvantaged, to help develop the nation, to bring about desirable changes, to improve the plight of peasants in one’s province, to help solve social and economic problems, to fulfil one’s dream of removing social injustice and to enhance the fame and status of one’s family and lineage. Generally, more male than female politicians mention ‘enhancing the fame and status of family and lineage’ as the dominant motive to enter politics. The male prerogative and preoccupation with extending lineage and legacy may propel them to believe that this is an important goal. Perhaps because women have not been culturally assigned the responsibility of continuing the family line, they have paid less attention to this issue.
Women in Politics and Women and Politics

Since traditional Thai society has socialized women to serve and care for family members, service, care and nurturing have become ingrained characteristics of Thai women. It is probably correct to say that when Thai women politicians talk about serving the people, they mean it and take the task more seriously than their male counterparts. Some women politicians have in the past taken the role of caring for their constituents so seriously that this function appeared to have taken primacy over all other roles (Vichit-Vadakan 1993).

**LATENT GOALS**

In spite of the professed goals of the politicians, cultural continuity from the past may actually determine the ultimate goals politicians pursue, namely power, prestige, position and privilege. These ‘four Ps’ at the foundation of Thai cultural values do not fade away with time. Even beyond the political sphere, these four items emerge time and again. Although money is highly valued today, I would argue that for Thai people, money is never an end in itself. Money is desired for the material comforts it can bring. But above all, money is the means by which power, prestige, position and privilege can be attained. Thai society’s cultural heritage may have been weakened but not broken.

I would argue here that both male and female politicians desire the same latent goals in politics. As members of the same culture and socialization process, power, position, prestige and privilege appeal to both sexes. The difference, however, may lie in the intensity of each variable’s appeal to men and women. For women, whose concerns are generally domestic, revolving around the well-being and welfare of the family, as well as practical and pragmatic issues concerning children’s education and health, the desire for the ‘four Ps’ may not be as intense as for male politicians, whose concerns are long-term political goals in a competitive environment against other rivals.

**THE MEANING OF POLITICS IN THE THAI CONTEXT**

The meaning of politics in the Thai context has been of interest to me for some time. Some years ago I expressed the view that politics has a very special meaning and attraction to many Thai men, as more than just another vocation or career (Vichit-Vadakan 1997).
is no shortage of candidates, especially male candidates. I believe that politics today has taken on more dimensions than in the past. It may have become more utilitarian in the sense that it is perceived as a direct conduit to economic and social gains and advantages. It may also be a conduit to exert power and authority over others, however politics in the Thai context is never just utilitarian: it is still imbued with excitement and a psychological and emotional ‘high’. It also allows excess and indulgence in a way that satisfy adult males and it also portrays a game with high stakes. Although many politicians emerge as winners of the ‘game’, many others may end up as losers.

The costs of being in politics are higher today than before, not only monetarily but emotionally and psychologically as well. As an example, in a recent election, when a certain aspiring candidate was not chosen by a certain party, he broke down weeping. This is not an uncommon phenomenon today. Given the political reality of Thailand today, with a single dominant political party, the ‘rules of the game’ have been structured according to the party leader’s wishes, and it is therefore difficult to be an effective politician on one’s own. Again, there is no shortage of interested male candidates. Male politicians tend to hang on to politics far longer than female politicians. Regardless of set-backs, indignity, public shaming or disgrace over incidents such as election losses, many male politicians do not quit. To them, politics is like an addiction. Awareness of its harmful effects does not prevent them from craving it.

Women, however, tend to have a much more pragmatic and rational approach to politics, careful to enter the ‘game’ of politics and are especially careful not to stay too long or be self-indulgent. Knowing when to adopt an exit strategy seem to be a natural part of women politicians’ position and practice.

Obstacles and Barriers Facing Women in Politics
Women face a number of obstacles and barriers as they pursue politics at both formal and informal levels. These challenges are discussed below.

1) Stereotypes of women as weak, indecisive, emotional, dependent and less productive (Masdit 1993). In fact, the list of such
Biases regarding female characteristics runs beyond this list, and may include the inability to keep secrets, ‘nitpicking’ or being overly concerned with details, and narrow-mindedness. All said, these stereotypes do not sit well with leadership norms, and when society as a whole believes in these stereotypes, the myth of female inadequacy is perpetuated through socialization. Boys and men are allowed and expected to lead, while girls and women are suppressed through self-inhibitory practices such as the unwillingness to speak up or to lead, as well as censuring each other. The classic syndrome of the self-fulfilling prophecy is quite evident. Women are branded as weak and emotional, therefore when a woman shows weakness no distinction is made between personal attributes or idiosyncrasies and ‘female characteristic’ explanations. When a male leader or politician exhibits weakness or emotion, it is seen and treated as a personal problem and never an all-male characteristic. These negative stereotypes are internalized by both men and women in Thai society, hence a majority of both men and women truly believe that women are not suited for leadership roles.

Many women in Thai society feel that they have to play the role of the weaker sex, seeking male advice and playing up to the ‘male ego’ by acting dependent, indecisive and emotional. Hence, in both formal and especially informal politics, women often perpetuate the non-assertive, passive role while manipulating events behind the scenes in order to meet their goals.

One might argue that as long as women finally get what they want, why worry about how they get there? I would like to argue that there are many negative repercussions from the way women are expected to behave. For one, women do not dare speak to up, reason or argue on equal terms with men. Their lack of assertiveness leads to behind-the-scene manipulation, which may be considered devious. In general, such attributes endanger women’s roles as leaders and further reinforce societal prejudice against women.

2) Culturally prescribed ‘inferiority’ of women. In the paper ‘Born Inferior, Growing up Suppressed, Destined to Serve’ (2005), Ketkanda Chaturongkachoke shows quite clearly how cultural determinants in the
Thai context construct women as second-class citizens. She argues that Thai people believe that social behaviour can be genetically determined, and that women are ‘polluted’ because of menstruation. Also, daughters are understood to be inferior to sons as they cannot be ordained as monks, and therefore cannot elevate the family's status.

Women are assigned the role of serving in both the family and the community. While service is a commendable attribute in humanity, women are as a result designated an unequal role of service: in child-rearing, household chores, and even community services. In rural Thailand today, the population is assigned the task of mobilizing and organizing themselves in order to address various development issues, and one finds quite easily that women are appointed the lion's share of the tasks but do not enjoy leadership roles in such activities to the same extent as men. Political gatherings often exhibit the same phenomenon. Whilst women prepare for the meetings and rallies, often preparing meals and cleaning up afterwards, men express their political agenda and assign women certain activities.

3) Women's sexuality as an impediment to women's participation in politics. When a woman assumes public office, especially in politics, one of the most common accusations she will encounter and which maligns her good name is that of sexual impropriety. Allegations have been made again and again of women politicians' adultery or sexual affairs with their peers, often their political superiors. Indeed, this is an important factor explaining why many women chose not to enter politics. Realizing that sooner or later such an accusation will surface, younger women – who are especially targeted – prefer to not to expose their spouses and families to such pain and shame.

Why has this been such an important issue? If one looks at the sexual practices of male politicians, one finds that extra-marital affairs, visits to prostitutes, and other womanizing activities are plentiful and at times even displayed and discussed without shame. Thai society does not seem to find these practices shameful or even improper. Generally, the Thai culture gives men more freedom and leeway in sexual matters, while women are confined to stringent rules. Female
chastity was a necessity and a virtue in the past, and virginity at the
time of marriage was a requirement. Although the younger, urban,
educated generation may dismiss the above, these cultural prescrip-
tions and societal values remain tenacious among other groups even
today. In Thailand, promiscuity is used as an indictment only against
women’s moral character, and never against men.

In traditional Thai society, where polygamy was not only prac-
ticed but also a means for establishing social and political alliances,
socio-structural factors were important, if not crucial, ways of con-
donning and approving polygamy among the ruling classes of society.
The values of feminine virtue, fidelity and loyalty to one’s spouse
were necessary to keep women in line. The double standards im-
posed on women today can therefore be understood as a legacy of
the past. While men continue to claim total ownership of women,
the same cannot be said for a woman over a man.

Male misconduct against female politicians may perhaps also be
viewed from another angle. Women who enter politics may be seen as
crossing the divide between male and female domains, the male domain
being the public or external sphere, and the female being the private or
internal sphere. A woman’s power as a mother, socializer and disciplin-
narian of children is accepted by society, as is her ability to procreate,
and to nurse and nurture her baby. Within the private sphere she has
potency, and when she crosses the threshold into a male domain, she
is carrying with her not only her innate power but also the potential
of extracting power from the male domain. As such, her sexuality may
become a target. Sexual improprieties, alleged or accused, could cut
down a woman politician’s potential to hold and utilize power from
the two domains by pushing her back into the private realm. Hence,
there is a need, albeit unconscious, ‘to put her in her place’.

From yet another angle, accusing women leaders of sexual im-
proprieties may function as a denigration of a woman’s power at-
tributes women are portrayed as mere objects of sexual pleasure.
It demeans women’s role as public figures and their personality by
pushing women back to the domestic realm where their sexuality
supersedes any duties in the public domain.
In essence, women’s sexuality and role as mothers and especially as wives (and perhaps unconsciously also as ‘surrogate mother figures’ in this role) has a frightening and intimidating effect on Thai men (Vichit-Vadakan 1997). To avert this sense of awe vis-à-vis the female figures, many Thai men comfortably revert to mingling and socializing among men. Even among colleagues, single-sex socializing normally takes precedence over mixed socializing. To insulate themselves against female intrusion, Thai men carve out special activities and niches for themselves such as drinking after hours, visiting places where women will not go, and/or having sexual encounters with singers, waitresses and bar girls at night entertainment places.

The fact is that such places (where men choose to congregate and possibly discuss work-related matters) exclude women colleagues. Women are inadvertently left out of intimate and informal dealings that take place there, and which are essential to the process of political exchange.

4) **Low self-esteem, modesty, humility and lack of confidence** appear to be common characteristics among many female politicians. These are characteristics that women adopt in order to avoid resentment, making them appear less threatening. Women may, however, lose credibility or respect, not be taken seriously, or be overlooked by the public because of these characteristics.

The media is often critical of women politicians for not asserting themselves, for not advocating anything new or special, or not making the news in general. Women politicians are modest and humble. They tend not to seek the limelight and prefer to address needs and problems on the ground. Compared to many male politicians who thrive on fiery speeches, feisty behaviours and outspoken habits that may border on boastfulness, female politicians tend to be soft-spoken, demure, humble and modest, which make them appear pale beside their colourful male counterparts. Just as many male politicians flaunt their status, position and power, most female politicians choose to underplay their status and position. The public shares the cultural values of the ‘four Ps’ and endorses and admires male politicians’ use and display of these values more than they appreciate the un-bloated and down-to-earth ego of the female politician.
Women in Politics and Women and Politics

Why then are women politicians less confident and more humble and modest than their male counterparts? Women who enter politics usually do not step into an environment where they are given guidance to help prepare them for their role. With the exception of family ties, most young girls in their most formative years are not exposed to politics. Understanding and learning about politics tend to be male-to-male activities. Girls are told at a young age that politics is serious business, and that they do best in stepping aside and leaving it to men.

While still in school, boys are usually assigned to leadership-building activities, which have been dominated by boys in the past. Boys have more experience of public speaking and expressing views and opinions in public.

When girls look around, leadership models tend to be male figures. The media does not enhance the image of women as capable leaders, as dramas or popular soap operas continuously portray stereotypically weak women, male supremacy, and female dependency on male super-heroes. Not even school textbooks are gender sensitive. Given all these barriers, it is amazing that there are any women at all who have been able to break through these socio-cultural barriers.

5) Political parties’ lack of gender awareness and gender sensitivity. In general, Thai political parties have yet to become truly responsive to gender-related equality, gender-awareness and gender-sensitivity. While certain individuals or party leaders may be more open and amenable to women’s participation in politics, political parties have not implemented gender-related policies in any real sense. Lip-service aside, women are not given special consideration as candidates for electoral seats or party list seats.

The failure to recruit political candidates (see Table 2.3 below) reflects a lack of will to increase the representation of women in Parliament. Similarly, there are no special efforts made to recruit, train or prepare women for office. Once in office, the new female candidates are given no special attentions such as tutoring. Although the male-dominated environment of politics is difficult and even intimidating for female newcomers, no special effort is made to help
Women and Politics in Thailand

initiate them into the ‘old boys’ network. Golf sessions and other such male bonding sessions are generally not open to women, let alone to new female politicians.

Table 2.3: Women in parliamentary elections, 1933–2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Members of Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women % women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1933</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1937</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1938</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1946</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1948</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1952</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1957</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1957</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1967</td>
<td>1,226</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1975</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1976</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1979</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1983</td>
<td>1,826</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1986</td>
<td>3,449</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1988</td>
<td>3,246</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1992</td>
<td>2,742</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1992</td>
<td>2,175</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1995</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1996</td>
<td>1,950</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2001</td>
<td>3,195</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2,409</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party list</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,973</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The failure to recruit political candidates (see Table 2.3 opposite) reflects a lack of will to increase the representation of women in Parliament. Similarly, there are no special efforts made to recruit, train or prepare women for office. Once in office, the new female candidates are given no special attentions such as tutoring. Although the male-dominated environment of politics is difficult and even intimidating for female newcomers, no special effort is made to help initiate them into the ‘old boys’ network’. Golf sessions and other such male bonding sessions are generally not open to women, let alone to new female politicians.

When women politicians are maligned through gossip and accusations of improper sexual activity, male politicians and the party leadership tend not to come to the women’s defence. Women politicians seem to be acting at the periphery of their own political parties, never quite able to sail into the centre stage.

6) **Money plays a critical role in political success.** Controversial as it may seem, I would like to argue that success in contemporary Thai politics to a large extent depends on the availability of monetary resources. Do women know how to mobilize these resources as well as men? Are women willing to recoup their own resources already put into politics? Obviously some women do know and survive the political game, however many women politicians are either unable or unwilling to spend as much as men, or do not wish to increase their spending by means of questionable methods. Political parties are not equally wealthy and cannot or do not support all of their candidates in the same manner (see Table 2.4). Consequently, some women politicians’ withdrawal from the scene may be based on a careful decision not to become indebted or impoverish their families.

7) **Lack of balance between work and private life.** The erratic hours of politics and the requirements of public and private appearances place a heavy burden on female politicians as they still need to maintain their personal and home lives. Women politicians are required to be good mothers, good wives and good daughters no matter how heavy their schedules may be, while male politicians tend to be excused from their familial roles and duties. This places
### Table 2.4: Men and women in the 2005 parliamentary elections, by party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>% women candidates</th>
<th>No. of women elected</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>% women listed</th>
<th>No. of listed women appointed</th>
<th>Total no. of women MPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thai rak Thai</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart Thai</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mabachon</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All others</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,523</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a strain on women politicians. Many are torn between the desire to remain active in their career whilst feeling reluctant to neglect their prescribed family roles, especially if there is no help coming from their spouse or other family members. Women are quite often heard proclaiming that they are ready to serve the public because their children have grown or because their husbands and children have given them permission to do so.

8) Public scrutiny and harshness towards women politicians. Women politicians often mention the harshness with which their performance is evaluated by the public. Perhaps because there are fewer women in politics, what they do or do not do stands out more clearly. The media may also focus on women because they are a minority. Moreover, as already discussed, because women have crossed the line into a traditionally male domain, their efficacy and performance are interesting to scrutinize, almost as if they must prove themselves worthy of breaking into a male domain.

The unkind, critical public is made up of men and women, young and old alike. While many male politicians sail through poor performances unscathed, female politicians with equivalent results will be called to attention. The evaluation of women politicians is indeed much harsher. They may find themselves in a situation where they risk being criticized for doing too much and too little at the same time.

9) Female critics can be especially harsh towards women politicians. The lack of female solidarity and sisterhood among Thai women has been discussed in the past (see Vichit-Vadakan 1997). In fact, women’s envy and jealousy of other women in Thailand is legendary. When a woman is assertive and proactive she is sometimes called names, one of them being Kra Dae which roughly means ‘over-demonstration’, ‘over-acting’, or ‘over-playing’ in a flirtatious manner. It has a clearly negative connotation. The term is not used to describe men and is rarely, if ever, used by men to describe women. Thus, it is a negative description of a woman’s behaviour used by other women. This is just one example of how Thai women can act towards each other with great criticism, envy and jealousy.
The historical practice of polygamy and especially sororal polygamy (where sisters sometimes were married to the same high-status man) may have created this deep-seated mistrust and tension among women. How could a woman trust other women when they could all be competitors for the same man’s love and attention? Older women tend to view younger women with suspicion and envy because they represent the older women’s loss and longing for youthfulness. George Foster (1987), a famous anthropologist, described the concept of the ‘limited good’ among the Mexican peasants where the fortune or riches of one person is perceived as detracted from the total sum of a limited pool. Hence, the luck or fortune of one person is never welcomed by the others as it reduces the size of the pie for the rest (Foster, 1987). Thai women may view other women’s achievement as detracting from their own.

As a result, I would argue that those who take part in the socialization process are unaware of the factors that perpetuate mistrust and unease between women. I believe that relationships between women are often fraught with competitiveness, envy and jealousy. Until this is recognized and dealt with, female solidarity and sisterhood will remain a distant reality.

Strengths of Women Politicians/Leaders

Women politicians have discussed their strengths as political leaders, as perceived by themselves and their male colleagues and by the public, and nine major points have been identified (UNDP 2006):

- They believe that they are ‘hands-on’ with their constituents and therefore truly understand the problems of the people. They also possess empathy and sympathy for those who suffer and are in need of help. It seems to be a source of pride among women politicians that they deal with issues bottom-up, using hard facts about real conditions.

- Women politicians are modest and do not have inflated egos, so their non-threatening posture helps them serve as mediators in conflict situations.

- In concert with the point above, women politicians also feel that
they could and generally do play a strong role in co-ordinating different parties, groups and factions in order to get things done. Women negotiate and bargain in a soft and gentle way, which set differences aside and find mutually acceptable solutions.

- Women believe that they exhibit a greater degree of altruism and selflessness when they make sacrifices for the greater good. They profess to enjoy doing so and are not resentful about it.

- Women have a high level of tolerance and endurance. In their work and in inter-personal dealings and relationships, women politicians have endured a lot just to be where they are. They have also had to tolerate all sorts of unpleasantness, even insults and abuse in their work as women politicians, however endurance, patience and tolerance usually pay off in the long run.

- Responsibility is women’s special trait. Women are often conscientious and responsible in how they carry out assigned tasks and commitments. Women also apply themselves in management. Overall, they are responsible and effective managers. In the village context, it is often cited that when women serve as treasurers, they see to it that all loans are repaid.

- Women’s other special trait is the ability to listen to others in an empathic way. Through a soft approach and a genuine will to listen to the problems of others, women politicians have succeeded in gaining the confidence of the people.

- Women are generally hard-working and honest. To make up for a late entrance into politics, they apply themselves and work twice as hard, devoting much time to understand the problems and to learn the ropes. Successful Thai women often state that they have achieved their status by working twice as hard as men.

- Women politicians are proud to be in the service of others, and to ensure the high quality of that service.

**HOW DO WOMEN WITHOUT A POLITICAL LEGACY PREPARE THEMSELVES FOR A CAREER IN POLITICS?**

This is an important question which requires thorough elaboration. Women with a family legacy of political involvement may be able sim-
Women and Politics in Thailand

Ply to step into the shoes of their male relatives. They also grow up in an environment where politics is a way of life. Exposure to the people and issues of politics naturally guides these women into their political role with ease and comfort. For those with no legacy, the path to politics seems to be via volunteer community activities. As they perform well at the community or local level, they begin to gain confidence and in this way, experience in social activism and as social leaders often paves the way for further engagement in the public arena.

Social engagements like these often broaden one’s network and can be useful when seeking advice, counsel and even mentorship. This network of relationships also serves as a support-base for the person, and is used during competition for other positions, including political ones. Frequently, women politicians and women leaders identify with a mentor as a source of opportunities to manifest their capability. In a highly personalistic society like Thailand, having a patron or someone who helps to guide and monitor one’s performance is much valued, thus a senior person who is a direct superior or an indirect mentor may help enhance one’s career. Not surprisingly, women politicians take their roles as good clients or attentive and grateful mentors and pupils seriously and work hard for those who have taken an interest in them.

The home environment or a nurturing and warm family environment is often cited as an asset for building confidence and self-esteem. Even when the home environment is not perfect, it would help if young girls were not prohibited from doing certain things and trying out new activities.

Critical and Frequently Asked Questions About Women in Politics

When addressing the issue of women’s empowerment and the role of women in politics and leadership, certain questions often emerge. Some of them are:

- How crucial is it for women to be in public office?
- Are women in public office actually effective and useful to other women?
Women in Politics and Women and Politics

- Why do women in public not help advance women’s causes?
- Is it only important to increase the number of women in high offices or must we also consider quality?
- What kind of roles should women leaders try to achieve?

To address the above questions, I will try to use examples mostly from Thailand but also from other Asian countries.

It is crucial to have women represented and participating in high public offices both in elected and appointed positions. The ideal is to have politics that is gender-aware and gender-sensitive. Even though this may not have been fulfilled in a number of cases, it is safe to say that it is better to have few women in high positions than not to have any at all. One important reason is that the society needs to become accustomed to the idea that women can and ought to be found in high positions. Men also need to become accustomed to working with women and seeing them as their superiors, and girls and women need to see women in high places as a normal occurrence. In other words, women’s presence and visibility in high positions is a crucial first step. It is critical to make the notion of women in politics familiar and normal. Until the presence of women in high positions becomes a normal occurrence, women will continue to be seen as peripheral with regards to leadership roles and higher positions.

**Are Women in Public Office Effective and Useful to Other Women?**

Women in high positions with gender awareness and sensitivity may be useful and effective in more than one aspect. In the case of Thailand, Khunying Supatra Masdit is a woman minister who has served two different governments and contributed to women’s causes through the creation of a first national women’s machinery. She successfully argued for the need of such an institution from within the government. Subsequently, she appointed the first woman ever to be a Permanent Secretary, breaking the glass ceiling for women by demonstrating that they could serve in the highest civil service position. When she was Chairperson of the NGO Forum for the Beijing meetings, she became a symbol of Thai women’s success in
the international arena. It also created greater interest for gender issues in Thailand.

Another positive case in point is Dr. Saisuree Chutikul who was a woman minister in the Anand Government. As a social activist with gender awareness and a social conscience, she was responsible for many important social reforms during her time in government (Chutikul 1993). She played a critical role in several important changes, including:

- Revision of the law on nationality allowing children with a Thai mother but foreign father to have Thai citizenship. Previous to this revision, only children of Thai fathers were eligible, which was a clear discrimination against Thai women who married foreigners.

- Revision of the regulations on maternity leave. This was a long and strenuous battle involving civil society and labour leaders and as a cabinet minister Dr. Saisuree helped make these changes possible. She started by extending maternity leave in the public sector to three months, followed by similar changes in the private sector.

- Revision of the law concerning child prostitution, as well as facilitating the enforcement of the law.

- Enabling public debates on the advancement of women to raise awareness of the discrimination against women who wish to become appointed to higher offices.

- Upgrading the Secretariat of the Commission on Women’s Affairs to the status of a full division.

It is also important to mention the role of Khunying Thipawadee Maksawan, who was pro-active on gender equality while she held the post of Secretary-General of the Civil Service Commission. She had multi-pronged strategies for creating gender-awareness, and implementing ‘gender mainstreaming’ in government agencies’ working plans and activities. She also institutionalized mechanisms for gender
responsiveness among public sector organizations, even at the departmental level. Gender focal points for departments were required.

To create awareness of gender issues, Khunying Thipawadee organized courses for civil service executives and senior executives incorporating topics on gender equality and other gender-related issues. She also created a special network and forum for middle- and high-level women in the civil service so they could meet and learn about leadership, and gender-sensitive leadership in particular.

Women leaders also make a difference within the parties. The current minister in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, Khunying Sudarat Keyuraphand, was at one time a staunch supporter of training programs and courses for women who entered politics. She was also a founder of the Women for Democratic Development Foundation, a non-partisan organization to promote women's participation in politics.

Khunying Kalaya Soponpanich and Dr. Prussadee Thamthai from the Democrat Party were instrumental in their party's increased openness to women, pushing for changes in party structure during its time in opposition. The Democrat Party now stipulates that each of its branch committees should reserve at least two seats for women.

It was reported that the policy priorities of Corazon Aquino, the former President of the Philippines, had a positive impact on women, as did her style of open and democratic governance. It is also felt that her softer style of leadership was more comfortable for women (Col 1993).

Anderson’s (1993) study of Benazir Bhutto shows that in spite of criticism of Bhutto’s leadership, she significantly improved the lives of Pakistani women. Bhutto served as a role model for Pakistani women, and for Muslim women all over the world. She also symbolized a new era of social freedom, liberating Pakistani women from some of their traditional restrictions, which was no small deed at all (Anderson 1993).

**Why Don’t Women in Politics Help Advance Women’s Issues?**

As for the question of why successful women do not help other women, this is by no means a unique phenomenon. In the case of
Bangladesh, where a quota system was established to help increase women’s representation in officer, civil service and teaching posts, and in parliamentary seats, something unexpected occurred. When women were represented in all areas of public life they rarely spoke on women’s behalf (Rahman 1993).

In the Thai case, as discussed above, historical antecedents may explain the tensions between women, manifested in jealousy and envy. The experience of women politicians and leaders demonstrate a need for women to understand and support each other. Whether or not they have experienced the same obstacles, women need to sympathize with the difficulties of other women, be it female politicians understanding other women in society or women in society understanding the reality of female politicians. In sum, this is a complex issue. Unless women can sympathize with other women’s problems and difficulties and unless women do not become more understanding and supportive of one another, it will be difficult for women to advance women’s issues. In Thailand, some successful women seem quite ready to claim that they are ‘gender blind’. Perhaps they want to be seen as self-sufficient or as equals to men, perhaps they truly do not see why gender is an issue, or perhaps they do not want to alienate the men they work with.

A frequently asked question is whether it is only important to increase the number of women in high offices or whether quality must also be considered. In Thailand, there are divergent opinions on this issue. Some women leaders advocate for the increase in number as a first step to familiarize society with the presence of women. Others are more cautious and insist on having both, calling for more women but also for women who provide quality in terms of forwarding women’s issues. If I were asked which argument gets more support, I would guess that more people in Thailand, including many women would be against just playing the numbers game by adding more women. In fact, many people caution against having ill-prepared or unqualified women in high positions because they believe that it can backfire on the movement to help advance women in politics and in administration. As society is still prejudiced against
Women in Politics and Women and Politics

women’s participation in the public domain, any shortcomings will be blown out of proportion and taken poorly.

The final question, regarding the kind of roles women leaders should aim for, is an interesting question with no uniform answers. More studies need to be done on this to ascertain answers from different age and sex groups and from different socio-economic statuses. Expectations and perceived leadership roles are likely to vary according to a host of variables. In an opinion survey commissioned by the UNDP Bangkok Office in 2006 on what people think about women as political leaders, the answers were mixed and even contradictory in parts. While there was no strong opposition to women attaining high political offices, there were some mixed feelings about women’s leadership abilities.

VALUE CHANGES AS A FUNDAMENTAL NECESSITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN WOMEN AND POLITICS

Hopefully, this paper has been able to show that the obstacles and barriers women in Thailand confront are due largely to cultural factors. Values and beliefs biased against women still contribute to the socialization process, inculcated and internalized from one generation to another. Regardless of background, gender-biased perceptions are present everywhere, including in families, communities, schools, media and working environments. As long as negative stereotypical characteristics of women are perpetuated, gender biases will be perpetuated. As long as there are concerns about the importance of male blood lines or there is a belief that women are born as a result of negative karma, discrimination against women will continue. Among the more traditional Thai people, menstruating women are still considered to be ‘polluted’. Men and women’s clothing are still laundered separately (Chaturongkachoke 2005), and women’s underwear are considered dirty and shameful to expose.

There are other countries in the Asian region besides Thailand that have these kinds of prejudices against women. For example, Japanese society holds rather negative stereotypes of women, which virtually exclude them from public life and public roles (Nakanishi
Fewer Japanese women are represented in the professions than Thai women. Married Japanese women tend to stay at home as mothers and ‘homemakers’ once they have children. It is interesting, however, that Japanese women have become increasingly socially active and participate in activities that are not directly political, but serve as a basis for pressuring political actors and political policies and decisions. Such channels may be Parents and Teachers Associations, consumer protection or related activities. Local environmental protection issues also engage Japanese women’s involvement. Such social participation is interesting as it may pave the way for a greater role for Japanese women in policies and legislation.

The South Korean situation also calls for drastic changes in the socialization process in order to promote women’s participation in politics (Sohn 1993). In Korea, as in Thailand, money is a major factor behind successful participation in politics, and women are undoubtedly disadvantaged on this basis (Park 1993).

WHAT VALUES NEED TO BE CHANGED?

In Thailand, all members of society need to understand, appreciate and implement basic human rights. Equality and women’s rights are subsumed under human rights. Men and women are equal and mutually dependent on one another, hence women and men need to support each other. Women are neither polluted nor the result of bad karma. The succession of the family name and posterity can be fulfilled by both sons and daughters. In Thailand, which is a society with a bilateral kinship system, such beliefs should be irrelevant and incongruent with the bilateralism of the kinship system.

Specifically, boys and girls need to be treated the same in school and at home. Gender-specific toys, games, plays, reading items, songs etc. need to be deemphasized. Boys and girls need to share duties and tasks from a young age. Segregation of boys and girls does not engender natural mixing and learning from one another.

Boys need to be taught to respect the women surrounding them. Also, it is critical that girls are taught not to be passive vis-à-vis men. Male and female relationships need to be based on mutual trust, concerns, sincerity and honesty. Translating this into action, men,
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women, boys and girls need to help one another and become open and honest with each other. Thai women need to break the pattern of pleasing, serving, entertaining and cajoling men at the expense of their own true feelings.

Thai women in general have done a great job building a strong basis for social capital. They are non-extremist and opt for a non-excessive approach which is inclusive of divergent views, ways and practices. Women should not give this up based on a perception that the way men behave is better than women's moderate style. Put bluntly, women need to be less eager to please men at the expense of their own true feelings.

The questions raised earlier of why many successful women shun women’s issues resonates everywhere. Many successful women appear too eager to be accepted by men which undermines their courage to stand up for other women. At times women who have made it become fearful that their privileged status will be lessened by an influx of other women who then acquire the same status. Some women feel that women who are newcomers should be exposed to the same obstacles they experienced, so they do not devalue the struggle that they have had to go through.

In the long run, changes in values for men, women, boys and girls will prove to be the most useful and sustainable strategy for Thai society in the quest for gender equality.

WOMEN AND POLITICS

It is absolutely correct to claim that an increased number of women in politics will not automatically solve the problem of gender equality. Larger numbers of women in politics is good and desirable goal, as they are symbolic and will help normalize women's presence, as discussed earlier. Women need to realize their potential, stand up, and take control of their lives and their environment. Politics is here understood in a broader sense to include all types of decision-making in everyday life. As such, women interact with other people and are faced with all types of decisions in their everyday life, and it is in this context women need to be conscious and conscientious of their
rights and ability to make reasonable choices and decisions. In Thai society, it is not rare for women to be financially independent, so women are not usually economically dependent on men. Women’s emotional and psychological independence must still be fostered, however. Women need more self-esteem, self-confidence and self-respect to reach these goals. When Thai women learn to take control of their lives, we will be able to celebrate and confirm that we have truly achieved our goals for women and for politics.

NOTES
1 This information is derived from interviews with women politicians conducted for The Thematic Report for the UNDP Millennium Development Goals and on Women in Politics (2005) with Juree Vichit-Vadakan as team leader, as well as printed interviews with politicians over the year.
2 Even today, many women, including women politicians, believe that the primary role of a good politician is to provide social service and welfare.

REFERENCES
Women in Politics and Women and Politics


INTRODUCTION: STATUS OF THAI WOMEN

The status and roles of Thai women, who currently make up half of the Thai population (which totals 65 million people) have been changing. Thai women’s socio-economic situation has improved substantially due to sustained national economic growth prior to the economic crisis of 1997. These improvements can be seen in the increased levels of health, education, employment and income. Health and life-expectancy of the overall population have improved and women have a five year longer life-expectancy. In addition, infant mortality rates have decreased and the number of women dying in childbirth has decreased. With education, the female literacy rate has improved, although there are still more females than males who are illiterate (Office of Women’s Affairs and Family Development 2005).

Thai women participate actively in the labour force, making up nearly half of the employed population. Women, whose potential and capabilities have been recognized, now have much better chances of gaining employment. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s women formed the majority of workers in the export and tourism industries. These industries yielded the highest foreign exchange
earnings (Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995a: 53–54). Despite the massive contribution to economic development and the amendments of labour laws for better protection of workers, unfair employment practices and mistreatment of women workers prevails. For example, women earn less than men in the same industries (Gender and Development Research Institute 2006).

During the past decade, women’s participation in politics and administration was below ten per cent. In local administration, the number of women who are village heads and sub-district heads increased slightly to around three per cent. Since the establishment of the Sub-district Administrative Organizations in 1995, women’s participation in village head or sub-district head positions increased to seven per cent (Gender and Development Research Institute 2006). The past decade has also seen some women in administrative positions, namely provincial governor, district officer and sub-district officer, however there were no female governors or women in district officer positions in 2006. The number of women has started to increase in male-dominated professions such as law, in which 11.5 per cent of attorneys and 20.6 per cent of judges are women. The number of women executives has increased in government service, though representation is still beneath 20 per cent (Gender and Development Research Institute 2006).

In recent years, an enormous effort has been made to increase the visibility and advancement of women in society. The strategy has been to utilize gender information more effectively through the establishment of women’s networks and advocacy groups. While success has been satisfactory at one level, discriminatory practices against women are still prevalent. As such, women have a long way to go before equality is possible, let alone achieved.

This chapter focuses on the advocacy efforts of NGOs in promoting women’s involvement in politics. It starts with an overview of the status of women in the political arena and highlights diverse measures taken throughout the years, particularly after the fourth world Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1995). The experiences reflect not only the need for networking among all organizations,
including government and non-governmental agencies, but also that special measures and strategies are required to enable women’s active participation and thereby achieve gender equality.

The Need for Full Participation of Women in Politics

As in many other countries, in Thailand the roles generally ascribed to women are those of wife and mother. Consequently, women have primary responsibility for the home and the family. Men have thus been seen as the ones who should have more active roles in the public arena. Political participation for women is therefore restricted, sometimes by women’s own making, however as the linkage between politics and its influence on everyday life becomes more obvious, the role of women in politics has received more attention. Reasons cited for the full and active participation of women in politics include the following:

- Democracy will not be fully realized if women, who comprise half of the population, have been excluded from the power base. Representation reflecting this proportion is thus required.

- Maximizing human potential for national development is also impossible if women are not fully recognized as equally capable and critical in setting the direction of the development process. If women are not treated as such, the loss will affect the whole society.

- Women and men think and perceive the world differently due to different socialization processes. These differences have resulted in different roles, behaviours and attitudes, therefore if women’s interests and needs are to be protected and addressed, women must be included and their voices heard.

- If it is agreed that women are disadvantaged by the gap in status between men and women, whether it be legal, political, social or economic, there is no other choice except to make room for women in the realm of decision-making.

Despite all these logical reasons, representation of Thai women in political and administrative decision-making roles is negligible (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2003: 1–3).
NGO Advocacy for Women in Politics in Thailand

Women can participate in the political process in a variety of ways. First, women can be publicly involved by becoming politicians or administrators themselves. Secondly, women can exercise their right to vote and participate in the voting process to elect officials who will forward women’s issues. Thirdly, women can participate in the political process through their active involvement as advocates for women in power.

Women who hold political, administrative or other related roles obtain decision-making power and authority through these positions. Positions like these are acquired through appointment or election. Women in such positions can forward women's issues as they have the ability to influence legislation directly.

Women do not have to run for political office to influence policies on women’s issues. Women have the ability to vote, and the most basic form of involvement in the political process is to vote. By exercising their right to vote, women choose to use their decision-making power to influence society and put in office representatives who will make changes to improve women’s situation. In this way, women become beneficiaries of the democratic process.

Another way for women to demonstrate active political involvement is through participation in advocacy groups and networks. These organizations use the political process to produce change. Different strategies for loosening political control need to be devised depending on the levels of advocacy. This type of participation is seen in many forms such as policy or legislative campaigns or forming networks and interest groups which advocate change. The Women’s Constitution Network, the Coalition to Combat Violence against Women, the GenderWatch Group and the Women’s Labour Group are among such advocacy or network groups. When women become advocates, they become role models who influence the political process. While they are not elected politicians, they are key in enabling society to become a better place for women. The outcomes make for better communities and a stronger society on the whole.

Political participation, whether it be direct or indirect can be a prime catalyst for changes in society. Although it may be perceived as
particularly challenging, advocating from the ‘outside’ has proven to be effective, especially in situations where there are too few women in the political arena (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2002: 134–135).

Can Women make a Difference?
Whether women can make a difference in politics is one a frequently asked question. It is not easy to answer and sceptics want to see hard evidence. In some instances, it is rather hard to establish the extent of control or influence women have in producing change. Even so, as women’s participation in the political process increases, they will definitely influence the outcomes because they will give voice to opinions and concerns that were not raised in the past.

One could argue that women and men are known to have different perspectives and points of view on issues in general and that understanding the nature and depth of the differences is key to ensuring effective change. An investigation which involved female ‘grass-roots’ leaders and women in the Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO) determined whether men and women have different views on a number of topics (Bhongsvej 1998). The findings indicated that the differences reflected the different roles each group plays in the communities. As part of this research, one of the training activities organized for the SAO members by the Gender and Development Research Institute 1996 to 1997 revealed that men and women have a different set of priorities. Women were more concerned with projects relating to child care or occupational training while men prioritized projects of infrastructure. When men and women both prioritized infrastructure they did so for different reasons. For example, building roads of concrete was as important to women as to men. Women mainly held this perspective because of their concern for how children would be inconvenienced while trying to get to school during the rainy season. Clearly, concrete roads were better than dirt roads. The men wanted concrete road for their own convenience (since men travel more than women) and they had not considered the issue from anyone else’s point of view (Bhongsvej 1998: 4). It appears women consider situations in a societal context and what would benefit society as a whole.
NGO Advocacy for Women in Politics in Thailand

At times it is helpful to see how the development of women’s rights has worked in other countries in order to learn from that experience. Examples from foreign countries are often cited to show how women can make a difference. One example involves Scandinavian women, specifically in the late seventies and eighties, a time when women in those countries started making great strides in the political arena (Bhongsvej 1998). This implies that women can make a difference.

For Thailand, there is no simple answer. From one point of view, there will be no answer until women are at least close to having a majority in politics, in which case the work to increase women’s representation in politics must continue. From another point of view, the political participation of women’s support groups has resulted in many concrete, positive changes for women, therefore women can make and have already made a difference in the political and administrative fields.

CURRENT STATUS: WOMEN IN POLITICS

Although Thai women have had political rights since the change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, Thai women have been absent from positions of political leadership. In 75 years of democracy there has been very slow progress when it comes to women moving into the political arena (Thomson, Sheila 1995: 7-8).

At the National Level
Over the past fifteen years, women have made up about ten per cent of all political candidates, except in the elections in 1996 and in 2001, when women accounted for 15 and 12 per cent respectively (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2002: 142–143). The 2005 election saw women elected to 11.7 per cent of parliamentary positions, the greatest proportion so far.

The Constitution of 1997 introduced a new electoral system which was first implemented in the election on 6 January 2001. The number of MPs was increased by a hundred and these numbers come from the political parties’ lists. The system calls for each political party to submit a list of a hundred names. The number of votes gained determines the number of MPs from each party.
On the 37 party lists in the 2001 election, there were 147 women, which equates to 18.5 per cent of nominations. Among these, eight became MPs. In the election of 2005, only six women became party list MPs.

In the case of the Senate, where members were elected for the first time in 2001, 20 female senators were elected, accounting for ten per cent of the total. The latest Senate election was in 2006, when 43 women were elected, representing the greatest number of women elected thus far. The rate of participation for women was similar on the decision-making level within political parties, with females accounting for roughly ten per cent of party executives and a greater percentage of

Table 3.1: Politics at the national level (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of Parliament</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- constituency</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- party list</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senators</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Members</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The National Election Committee.

Table 3.2: Political party executives/advisors by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Party Executives</th>
<th>Party Advisors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Rak Thai Party</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat Party</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart Thai Party</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahachon Party*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NGO Advocacy for Women in Politics in Thailand

party advisors (see Table 3.2). The record achieved in the 2006 Senate election did not last long, however, as the leaders of the military coup on 19 September 2006 annulled the Senate election.

AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Local administration reflects the same picture, with female representation at less than ten per cent at all local levels (see Table 3.3). It should be noted, however, that this constitutes an increase from the two to three percent historically seen in local government results. Administrative power was decentralized to sub-district administrative organizations over ten years ago, and the number of women elected to these organizations increased to about seven per cent in the most recently held election.

The seven per cent women’s participation in the sub-district administrative organizations could have been much lower if not for the intensive campaigns and political training offered by NGOs. Female participation as sub-district and village heads has been about two to three percent since the Ministry of Interior allowed women to assume such positions 25 years ago. This development reflects a natural process of women entering local politics without special measures or affirmative action.

Table 3.3: Elected members of local government (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>% Female</th>
<th>% Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elected Local Government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provincial Council President</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provincial Council Member</td>
<td>2,250</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Municipality Council Member</td>
<td>13,846</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>87.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sub-District Head</td>
<td>7,263</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>97.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Village Head</td>
<td>61,344</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-District Administrative Organization (SAO)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Members</td>
<td>127,594</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Board chairpersons</td>
<td>6,725</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, Bangkok.
*Office of the Election Committee, Bangkok.
Why are Women Under-Represented?

Female politicians’ participation at national and local levels has been low despite equal opportunity efforts reflected in regulations and laws. According to representatives of political parties, both external and internal factors present obstacles for women entering politics (Bhongsvej 1998: 12–15). External factors include the following:

- **Political parties’ selection processes.** Women lack political resources such as a strong educational background, professional experience, and high levels of income. These factors become obstacles to women’s selection and therefore need to be eliminated.

- **The electoral system.** The system which has been in use for the past nine years has not increased the number of female MPs. Members of Parliament are appointed through elections in their constituency or through the political party list. With the party list system, competition between MPs begins once the ranking is made by the party. Given women’s lack of political resources, the party list approach should constitute an opportunity to increase the number of women in politics, however the opposite occurred: women were given a low ranking on the list, decreasing their chance of becoming MPs.

- **Societal Attitudes.** Women and men are perceived to have different roles. Current societal norms place men in the public arena and women in the private sphere, fully responsible for household management and care. Politics involves the allocation of resources and power and the political arena has therefore been regarded as more suitable for men than women. Since men have been in politics much longer the public does not trust women in the same way.

- **Internal Factors.** Obstacles to women entering politics are to a large degree related to the traditions and societal attitudes which view women as homemakers. At a seminar organized by the Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) in 1998, entitled ‘Policies on Women’, representatives from six political
parties gave similar reflections (Bhongsvej 1998: 16). When women lack confidence, political know-how, and information they are less goal-oriented. In addition, household burdens and childcare are obstacles to women. If women wait until their children are grown before they join politics, they will still be at a disadvantage as they have a shorter time to gain political experience than men.

Table 3.4: Number of eligible voters in the 1996 parliamentary election and 2000 senate election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election of MPs 1996</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The whole country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible voters</td>
<td>19,625,386</td>
<td>50.89</td>
<td>18,939,450</td>
<td>49.11</td>
<td>38,564,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voters</td>
<td>12,539,547</td>
<td>11,531,197</td>
<td>24,070,744</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible voters</td>
<td>1,903,691</td>
<td>52.45</td>
<td>1,725,614</td>
<td>47.55</td>
<td>3,629,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voters</td>
<td>951,406</td>
<td>826,032</td>
<td>1,777,438</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election of Senators 2000</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The whole country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible Voters</td>
<td>20,415,647</td>
<td>51.12</td>
<td>19,521,185</td>
<td>48.88</td>
<td>39,936,832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible Voters</td>
<td>1,974,131</td>
<td>52.72</td>
<td>1,770,096</td>
<td>47.28</td>
<td>3,744,227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Local Administration, Interior Ministry.

Even though they are under-represented as candidates, women play a significant role as voters – a strategic factor in terms of pushing for political change. In fact, the percentage of women eligible to vote is higher than men, and more importantly, the percentage of women exercising this right is also higher (see Table 3.4 above). Looking at the percentage of women in politics, however, it appears that unfortunately women do not vote for women.

There are many women's groups advocating for women in politics. They are either formally set up as NGOs or loosely and informally connected in order to promote women in politics. Although
these groups are far removed from the centre of power, their impact can still be felt both in increased representation of women in politics and in advancing the overall status of women (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2003: 35). Details of their advocacy will be addressed later in this chapter.

NGOS AND THEIR ADVOCACY FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS: WHY NGOS?

A government official cannot be a member of any political party. The bureaucracy is assumed to be politically neutral. It is therefore not surprising that the government has not given any attention to strengthening political leadership. This is true for both men and women. In cases where efforts seem justifiable, nothing has been done.

Prior to 1982, an Interior Ministry regulation stipulated that only men could serve as village heads and sub-district heads. Since the abolition of this rule, women have filled two to three per cent of the total number of village head and sub-district head positions. This rate has been consistent for the past 25 years. There was no attempt on the part of the bureaucracy to train women to assume such posts when this became legal. One could have expected such an initiative given that these village heads and sub-district heads are regarded as being under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry and receive their pay from the Ministry. When it comes to political posts and political representation the bureaucracy has no role. The bureaucracy uses a narrow interpretation of political neutrality (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2003: 48).

The Office of Promotion of Gender Equality (formerly known as the National Commission on Women’s Affairs) is the national machinery working for the advancement of women. The overall role of the organization appears to be facilitative in nature, however in practice, an active role in promoting women’s position in politics may have been intentionally avoided in order to maintain political neutrality. This national organization has formulated a twenty-year-plan for women, which entails measures and recommendations to
increase women’s representation in politics (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1992: 19–20), yet the overall plan has been neither monitored nor well implemented. After all these years, any increase in female representation in politics is only true in theory. Similarly in ‘Millennium Development Goals Plus’ the government ambitiously undertook to double the number of women senators, government executives and sub-district organization members by 2006 (National Economic and Social Development Board, 2004: 23). Unfortunately, these objectives turned out to be another disappointment. This is where NGOs must step in to fill the gaps that the bureaucracy has left.

NGO Movements

NGOs have made considerable efforts to advance the status of women and to strengthen their political roles. This perspective is undeniable. Historically, one can divide the movements for the advancement of women’s status into three periods: from the reign of King Rama V to the end of the absolute monarchy (late eighteenth century to 1932); from the beginning of constitutional monarchy until the International Women’s Year (1932–1975); and from 1976 to the present time.

At the beginning of the first period, during the reign of King Rama V, women’s political involvement was evident as they worked to gain equal rights. This period was the starting point in raising women’s political awareness and in encouraging their involvement in political issues. Two newspapers of the day, Nareerom and Kulasatree wrote articles to inform women of current issues and events. Another newspaper, Sayamyupadee, had a series of articles on women and politics published in 13 consecutive issues (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1997: 11). Many societal changes took place as a result of this, including trade with Western countries and educational opportunities opening up to women.

The second period commenced with the change from the absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, which produced concrete forms of political involvement. The first Constitution
provided equal rights and opportunities for men and women to run for election and to vote. Such legal equality has always remained whether the constitution has been abolished or amended. As a matter of fact, there was an attempt by the Women’s Promotion Group (currently the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women) to explicitly guarantee women’s rights in the Constitution of 1973 (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1997: 13).

One pioneering effort in the advancement of the status of women took place when the National Culture Council was established in 1952 by Thanpuying La-iad Pibulsongkram, who was married to a former Premier. One of the achievements was the stipulation of the Bureaucratic Reform Act of 1952 that the National Culture Council was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. There was evidence that in the first meeting of the National Culture Council, Thanpuying La-iad Pibulsongkram succeeded in ensuring equal rights between men and women in bureaucracy. This was a strong beginning, but unfortunately, it took time for government departments to accept this principle in practice (Suprapatanan 1992: 274–285).

During the same period, a group of women lawyers formed under the leadership of Khunying Supatra Singholaka (Singholaka 1992: 265 – 271) and a panel discussion on women’s rights was held for the first time at Thammasat University in 1948. In the years that followed, many activities promoting women’s rights occurred, particularly through the media. In 1955, the government appointed a committee to amend the Commercial Code to comply with the United Nations Charter regarding human rights. At that time, many women’s groups joined hands to campaign against their loss of rights when entering marriage. These issues were widely discussed on radio and television programs. A draft to amend the Commercial Code advanced the status of women in five areas: marriage registration, husband’s consent, marital assets, grounds for divorce and alimony. The draft amendment was submitted to General Thanom Kittikachorn, the Prime Minister in 1970 (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2003: 34).

Due to the solidarity among women’s groups in the continued struggles, their rights were guaranteed in the Constitution of 1974.
Article 28 of the Constitution stipulated that ‘Women and men have equal rights’. In addition, it further stipulated that all discriminatory laws had to be amended within two years after the promulgation of the new Constitution (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1997: 13).

Although the Constitution of 1974 was short-lived, it enabled many positive changes for women. The Ministry of Defence abolished the regulation prohibiting women beyond the rank of Lieutenant Major. The regulations of the Interior Ministry were amended to allow women to hold positions such as District Officer and Sub-district Officer within the Local Administration Department. The Ministry of Justice allowed women to become judges and attorneys. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs abolished the requirement for women to seek their husband’s consent to apply for passports. It also allowed women to be ambassadors (National Commission on Women's Affairs 1997: 13).

In period three, following the International Women’s Year and also the International Women’s Decade (1975–1985), women’s movements have been more visible. Women’s groups have been formed at all levels and have carried out activities according to their own missions and mandates. Building on earlier attempts when only women in the elite were active, increased participation has made it possible to give greater attention to more diverse issues. These women’s groups differ in their management style and their concerns, and they are located in both rural and urban areas. These groups can be categorized into two broad types: advocacy groups, and capacity building and welfare-oriented groups.

Advocacy groups fight for the elimination of gender-based oppression. Their activities are diverse, ranging from awareness-raising, policy campaigns and legislative efforts to solve women’s problems. There are over 30 organizations which share similar visions and work together under such banners, among them are the Women’s Constitution Network and the Coalition to Combat Violence Against Women. Under their own mandates, some of these organizations are strictly promotion groups. Examples of such organizations are the
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Gender and Development Research Institute, the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, the GenderWatch Group, Friends of Women Foundation, Women’s Foundation, Empower, Women’s Movement in Thai Political Reform (WeMove), among others.

Welfare-oriented organizations primarily aim at improving the conditions for women. Some focus is also given to strengthening the capacity of women in economic, social and political development. Among these are alumni associations, professional groups, such as nurses or female physicians’ associations, as well as income generating groups.

The formation of women’s groups and movements which sponsor activities aiming at political change has resulted in positive progress for women in many areas, including legislative change and improved quality of life. Often referred to as capacity building, efforts focus on a variety of ways to improve women’s situations through training, job skills development and more education (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2003: 35).

The promotion of women in the political arena has also been pursued by more active advocacy groups. The catalyst for this increased activity was the fourth UN World Conference on women held in Beijing, China. Efforts to increase female participation in politics are now part of a rejuvenated agenda for advocacy groups (GenderWatch Group December 2006b: 1–24).

INCREASING WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION: NGO EXPERIENCES

Since the early 1990s, particularly after the Beijing Conference, considerable attention has been given to the issue of women’s representation in decision-making positions. A variety of interventions have been launched, from raising awareness among the voters to preparing and encouraging women to run in the elections. Efforts have been made in collaboration with both the political parties and the government to carry out campaigns to increase the representation of women.

The following discussion features two major categories of activities. The first is increased political activity among women through active
NGO Advocacy for Women in Politics in Thailand

promotion and interventions, including the establishment of a more conductive political environment. The second category is focused on monitoring mechanisms to ensure that women are promoted in the political arena in accordance with government policies.

The efforts to ensure greater participation by women in politics have been carried out primarily by NGOs and women’s groups. Many organizations and groups have been formed specifically to promote women’s representation in politics. The Women in Politics Institute, for example, was originally formed to train female leaders. Other women’s groups such as the Female Village and the Sub-district head Group and the Lanna Group in the northern region have also been actively training ‘grass-roots’ women leaders to run in local government elections, particularly at the sub-district level. Other organizations and groups with few mandates other than advocating for female representation in politics have also been involved in increasing women’s representation in some way. One of the more established and active organizations that promotes women in politics and in administration is the GDRI. Throughout its 16 years, a variety of activities have been launched to advance women’s participation in politics (Gender and Development Research Institute 2005: 12–16 and 52–55).

Sharing the Experiences: The Gender and Development Research Institute

The GDRI, established in 1990, is a non-profit, non-governmental organization. It is the research branch of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. Its primary mandate is to carry out research at the policy level that will help advance the status of women, and to advocate for gender equality. The scope of activities has been comprehensive, with most activities combining the goals of increasing the representation of women in both political and administrative decision-making positions.

The work of the GDRI in this area can be categorized into three levels:

- **Societal**: raising awareness and recognition of the roles women play in national development and the need to vote for them.
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- **Institutional**: efforts to increase the number of women in strategic institutions.
- **Individual**: strengthening the capability of women themselves.

**The Societal Level: Raising Public Awareness**

It is undeniable that women and men go through different socialization processes. Different institutions such as the home environment, schools, workplaces, media and society have reinforced historical roles, behaviour, and attitudes. Despite the rapid changes in lifestyles, the pace of change in terms of attitudes has been much slower. Women are still perceived as homemakers, as wives, and as mothers, despite having contributed significantly to Thailand’s national, economic, social and political development.

A change in public attitudes is very important if women are to be accepted in the public decision-making arena. The changing roles of women need to be emphasized repeatedly and outstanding achievements by women highlighted and broadcast in a wider circle. The activities launched by the GDRI to facilitate public acceptance

**Figure 3.1: GDRI’s strategy for increasing female representation in politics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public media</td>
<td>Societal</td>
<td>Raising awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-makers</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increased representation of women in decision making

*Source: Vichitrnanonda and Bhongsvej 2003: 36.*
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included a variety of instrumental forces. Outstanding awards are given out each year during International Women’s Week to highlight the success of women from different walks of life. Many recipients are grass-roots women leaders. Each selected woman receives the Prime Minister’s plaque for their achievement. The number of categories of achievements has increased over the years from six in 1993 to ten in 2006. These ten categories include agriculture, environment, mass media, politics, management, sub-district administration, development work, entrepreneurship, youth activities, labour and small enterprises (GenderWatch Group 2006a: 4–14). Another idea the GDRI realized resulted in three volumes of a Directory for Female Agents of Change, which compiled achievements and perspectives of women in different professions, which were published and disseminated in 1996, 1998 and 1999. The objective of featuring female agents of change was to make it easy for those in power to access a pool of women who were ready to participate actively in policy-making or decision-making at the national level. The Directories, which describe the achievements of 201 women in multiple fields, should address the often-heard statement that individuals do not know where to find capable women in certain fields.

The media has also been instrumental in increasing public awareness of the achievements and contributions of women. Prior to the 1997 elections, efforts had been made to convince the public to vote for women. An example from the lead-up to the 1995 elections is the publication of articles in The Bangkok Post (Bhongsvej and Thomson 1995a: 26; 1995b: 30; 1995c: 26; Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995b: 30) and in Dok Bia Karmmuang, a Thai weekly magazine (Bhongsvej and Thomson 1995d: 18–19; Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995c: 28–29) to highlight the profiles and achievements of female candidates. This coverage raised awareness of the significance of having women as MPs or senators.

The Institutional Level: Working with Political Parties and Government

The GDRI has been instrumental at the institutional level, being the first organization to work with political parties, starting in the
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...early 1990s. In its initial stage, the effort directed at political parties was not specifically focused on promoting women's representation in politics but rather on women's concerns in terms of electoral issues. It led to a greater awareness of women's significant potential and achievements in transforming politics. As a matter of fact, it has laid a strong foundation for the promotion of female representatives in politics in the years that followed.

Prior to the March 1992 election, a series of meetings was held by GDRI to advocate for the integration of female concerns into the policies of political parties. After a meeting with women's groups to identify pressing issues, the very first forum entitled ‘Political Party Policies on Women's Issues’ was held in collaboration with 17 women's groups and organizations in August 1991 (Thomson and Thomson 1993: 15–16). Over 300 people participated in this forum, including female leaders from different parts of the country, exchanging views with nine party leaders and representatives. The grass-roots women leaders participating in the meeting considered it very useful to have dialogues on women's issues with politicians and to press them on electoral issues (Gender and Development Research Institute 1991: 7–47). Subsequently, similar meetings were held in nine other provinces throughout the country to enable political candidates to air their views on women's issues (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 52–56).

The meeting in August 1991 and subsequent regional meetings signalled the starting point from which the political parties identified and disseminated their policies on women to the public. The national election in July 1995 reflected the GDRI’s efforts, as political parties stated their policies and raised the issue of female participation in the formulation of administrative and development policies. Six political parties were invited to appear on a television program entitled ‘Policies of Political Parties on Women's Issues’, which was televised live in June 1995, one month prior to the election (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 57–59).

Campaigns pressuring political parties to enumerate policies on women have continued. In subsequent elections, there has been active
pursuit of forums for the political parties to state their policies, including increasing the number of women in decision-making positions.

After the 1997 Constitution was promulgated, the GDRI pressed political parties for their policies on the support for women’s candidacy under the new electoral system in March 1998. In October 1998, the GDRI also organized a forum for political parties to state their views on how to increase the number of women MPs and on the inclusion of women on the party list for an alternate rank with men for the forthcoming election (Gender and Development Research Institute 2002: 11). The Women and the Constitution Network comprises about 30 NGOs working for women, including the GDRI. Towards the end of 1998 it put additional pressure on the political parties by asking about their plans to involve women in the next election.

In all forums, the political parties were non-committal, only indicating that the parties are ‘wide open’ for women. No specific quota or other measures had been specified to ensure that a larger number of women would become MPs.

More recently, the GDRI organized a seminar as part of a series of activities to celebrate International Women’s Day in 2004. Political parties were invited to state their policies on their support for women in politics and on policies related to social problems. No clear policies for the promotion of women emerged, however there were many suggestions from the audience. These included the imposition of a quota of equal representation of male and female villagers in Sub-district Administrative Organizations, putting more women on the party list, and placing them high on the list or preferably putting them in an alternate rank with men. Recommendations from the seminar were also sent to political parties as a reminder (Gender and Development Research Institute 2004: 3–4).

Pressure on the government to develop policies on women by the GDRI in collaboration with GenderWatch Groups and other women’s organizations is a continuation of the earlier campaigns to get political parties to form policies with regards to women (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 52–59). When the government was formed, letters identifying women’s concerns, including
increasing women’s participation in decision-making, were sent to all political party leaders in the coalition and to those responsible for drafting government policy.

It should be noted that the very first campaign targeting political parties prior to the election resulted in the explicit inclusion of women’s issues in the policy of the government. Advocacy by the GDRI and some women’s organizations including the Female Parliamentarians Group helped to bring about this change while the government was being formed. In October 1992, when the government of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai came into power, the policies to amend the laws relating to job discrimination, elimination of child labour and child prostitution were clearly identified. This was the first time in political history that issues raised by women were incorporated in the government policy statement (Sheila Thomson 1995: 21-22). Despite the fact that the policy did not specifically promote women in decision-making, recognition of the need to involve women and to pay attention to women’s issues was more evident.

The three governments that followed included in their policies the support for the participation of women in the public arena. The governments of Prime Minister Banharn Silapa-archa and General Chawalit Yongchaiyuth incorporated issues that the GDRI had advocated in their policy. In their policy statements in July 1995 and December 1996, there were explicit clauses to promote women’s participation in national, economic, social and political development at all levels (Gender and Development Research Institute 2000: 17).

The positions of the 1997 government had the most explicit policy in terms of women in decision-making. In Section 2.6.8 (4) of the Constitution there is a commitment ‘to promote gender equality by amending laws, regulations and rules to provide the opportunity for women and men to engage in a career or to have an administration and decision-making role both in the public and private sectors on equal terms in line with the Constitution’ (Gender and Development Research Institute 2002: 12).

In order to increase the pace at which women enter positions of power and to level the playing field, affirmative action is required.
The Constitution of 1997 allowed for positive discrimination in its Article 30. The GDRI has taken the lead in attempts during the past decade to raise awareness of the legality of the application of quota for a balanced representation of men and women in both politics and administration. Two relevant seminars were held, the first of which addressed the imposition of a quota for the membership of local governments (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 66 – 68). In the second seminar, government officials deliberated on the policy implications of affirmative action within the context of elimination of discrimination against women (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 84–86). As experienced elsewhere, the idea received both resistance and support. The more moderate stance argued that women should make up 30 per cent of the representatives, rather than 50 per cent since the move towards equal representation is impractical, considering the cultural context. According to the democratic principle, however, only 50 per cent reflects true and equal representation.

Successful advocacy for equal representation was seen in the case of the membership of the committee of the Village and Urban Community Revolving Fund. When the Thaksin Government came into power in 2001 it enacted policies to strengthen the grass-roots economy, establishing the Village and Urban Community Revolving Fund in each of the country’s 71,364 villages and 3,517 urban communities, through the provision of Bht 1,000,000. The aim was to widen economic opportunities and promote self-reliance by strengthening the fund management capacity at the grass-roots level. The fund is to be managed and conditions of loans set by the villagers themselves (Village and Urban Community Revolving Fund 2001: 3–4).

When the policy was introduced and while the drafting of the implementation plans and regulations were taking place, women’s organizations and the now defunct Office of the National Commission on Women’s Affairs lobbied for the representation of women in the Village Fund Committee. The Deputy Prime Minister, who chaired the national committee, said that there would be no discrimination against women. Yet, when the regulation came into effect, there...
was little chance that women would be well-represented, because the regulation specified that the fund committee would be formed by having the village heads call for a meeting of the heads of the households to nominate and select from among them 7–15 members. Over 97 per cent of the village heads were men and 75 per cent of the heads of the households were also men. On the day the project was launched, 54 women’s organizations, led by the GDRI, presented a letter to the Prime Minister at the opening ceremony including these figures. The letter requested a review of the process for the formation of the committee and asked that a quota system be taken into consideration. The Prime Minister at his inaugural speech admitted that there was a mistake and an amendment to the composition of the fund committee was necessary. A subsequent change in the regulation imposed equal representation of men and women in the Village Fund Committees (Office of Women’s Affairs and Family Development 2002: 39–40).

Although follow-up studies do not have sex-disaggregated statistics on who has borrowed through this scheme, the funds could be inferred to be more accessible to women. At the very least, women have been given much better control over village or community funds. Three years after implementation, the government and those involved were very happy to see the success of the revolving fund. In particular, it was found that non-performing loans have been less than three per cent (Sutiti 2003: 23).

Such a success in advocacy has indicated that affirmative action should not be considered a dead end. The current effort of putting an equal number of males and females in the Sub-district Administrative organizations is ongoing. Although the process is tedious, it helps in building up an understanding on affirmative action to get women in power and empowered.

The Individual Level: Training Candidates and Voters

While affirmative action for a balanced representation has not been practiced, training women to run in elections emerges as one important strategy for increased representation on the individual level.
Particularly at the local government level, which forms the basis for democratizing political development, special efforts must be made to encourage female leaders from the grass-roots to run for and win elections. These women along with women elected at the national level could provide a firm base for setting the agenda for women.

During the latter half of 1990s, the GDRI was actively engaged in the training of female leaders (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 66–72). The first series of activities focused on leadership training to prepare women for local positions in the government at the sub-district level. Additional training series upgraded administrative skills and raised gender awareness for elected members to ensure better gender-responsiveness in the administration of the local bodies (Gender and Development Research Institute 2002: 18). A series of workshops was organized for elected leaders to ensure that a gender perspective was incorporated in their local governance agenda. In the beginning, only women were invited. Subsequently, men were also asked to be involved. The mix of both sexes in the training has proved very useful as it allows each group to have the opportunity to appreciate the skills and abilities of the other group, and could enable them to work better as a team.

It should be noted that much effort has been made in the past years by NGOs to strengthen women leaders’ capacity. The Women and Constitution Network and local women’s networks throughout the country, such as the Lanna Women’s Network, have been very active in organizing leadership training for women who run in elections in the Sub-district Administrative Organizations (Women in Constitution Network 1999). During the late 1990s the Women and Politics Institute also conducted leadership training at both local and national levels. Additionally, over the past few years the newly established Office of Gender Equality in the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security has been supporting women by providing training to run in elections for Sub-district Administrative Organizations in different regions. Taking the percentage of women elected at the sub-district level as the indicator, one can conclude that the training conducted by all these groups has provided posi-
tive results, particularly if this is compared with the percentage of female village and sub-district heads elected. As stated previously, female heads at the village and sub-district levels were less than three per cent. As a result of focused training organized by NGOs, the percentage of women elected to positions in the SAO increased by four per cent to a total of seven per cent.

As few women have reached Parliament as elected members or as senators, it is rather difficult for them to make any move to further the status of women. Therefore, whenever women have acquired positions where they can better serve as change agents for the advancement of women, it is an occasion for joy and hope and they need to be congratulated. A gesture of support should be provided for them to work together for women’s issues. The GDRI therefore organizes a celebration ceremony soon after each election. During this ceremony, a special session is usually held where Members of Parliament or Senators share their concerns for women and their plans to work on those concerns. This kind of support started in 1992 (Gender and Development Research Institute 2002: 42–45; Gender and Development Research Institute 2005: 15-16, 52-55).

In addition to the above-mentioned use of the media to convince the public to vote for women, throughout the 1990s the GDRI has also collaborated with local newspapers in this effort. Readers were asked to identify which females candidates from which political parties would be elected one day before the Election Day. Men and women sent in replies in more or less equal numbers. Interestingly, women were more accurate predictors of the election outcomes (Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995d: 8-9).

The GDRI’s Longest Battle: the Campaign for Equal Representation at the Local Government Level

Efforts to increase female representation in key positions at the local government level continue. This ongoing campaign is aimed at strengthening the very foundation of democracy. Local governments also provide easier access to the political arena for women because candidates are not required to be members of political parties.
Believing that women can make a difference and be more responsive to the needs of all constituents, especially women, the GDRI fully advocates equal representation in local governments.

The struggle began in the early 1990s (Gender and Development Research Institute 1997: 66-68) and the first step came with the implementation of the government’s policy on the decentralization of administrative power to local administrative bodies. It was a crucial point in time to advance women’s political participation through the legislature. The GDRI held a series of meetings with different groups to raise awareness of the importance of women’s participation in the SAO (Gender and Development Research Institute 1994: 1-4). The first meeting was held in 1992 to gain consensus on the strategy of imposing a quota for representation in the SAO legislature to better enable women’s access to political power. In 1993 another meeting was held with the Parliamentary Committee on Administration and Pro-Democracy Group to deliberate on the legislative draft and to compile the recommendations, including equal representation of men and women in the Parliament. In spite of this the proposition did not gain support from those involved in the drafting of the bill (Gender and Development Research Institute 1993: 16–18).

Attempts were made to strengthen leadership skills among women leaders at the grass-roots level when it became evident that representation based on quota would not come to pass. Different civil society organizations joined hands to offer training and the results were positive. Women were keen to run in the election and up to 50 per cent of those trained by the GDRI were elected (Sheila Thomson 1995: 70).

The next move came when the People’s Constitution of 1997 was enforced. The Constitution permitted a legislative amendment or a new legislative draft to be considered by Parliament if it was submitted with the approval of 50,000 people. Since 2003, the GDRI has sought to mobilize the support of at least 50,000 people for a legislative amendment to have equal representation for male and female villagers in the SAOs. It seeks to amend the article relating to the composition of the SAO Committee by stipulating that
the representation of the villagers has to be equal: one male and one female (Gender and Development Research Institute 2002: 9).

To mobilize efforts effectively, various strategies were applied to raise awareness and obtain the signatures from supporters. A series of briefings and awareness-raising sessions were conducted to encourage the public to recognize the significance of women's involvement in the management of local administrative bodies. These strategies were not only utilized by the GDRI, but also incorporated into other forums.

Convincing those already in the SAOs has been another challenge. This was done by engaging one of the top male local government administrators at the city level, the Bangkok Governor, to give a lecture on the need to involve women in local administration management in a series of seminars organized for SAO leaders (Gender and Development Research Institute 2004: 4–5).

The mobilization of 50,000 supporters may initially seem an easy channel for getting the bill or the amendment passed, however the requirements for eligible support are cumbersome. Copies of civic registration and identity cards are required, and signatories must have had the right to vote in the most recent election. One difficulty is that civic registration is not normally carried on a person like the identity card is, and as there are many people registered within a house, the actual document is not often available. Additionally, if the required number of names with the proper documentation is obtained, the next hurdle is to have the proposed draft or amendment passed at both houses before it can be enforced.

The GDRI has also begun a new initiative over the past three years. During International Women’s Week, two awards have been added to the list of activities: the Outstanding SAO Woman and the Outstanding Sub-district Administrative Organization. Both awards pay respect to good governance practices and sensitivity to gender issues (GenderWatch Group 2001: 2). It is expected that these awards will be instrumental in increasing awareness of the significance of women’s participation in local governments.

In the last quarter of 2006, the full support of 50,000 supporters has been secured however the abolition of the 1997 Constitution
made this meaningless. Despite this occurrence, it should be noted that mobilization of support may not be easy and it takes time, but it serves as a good instrument for raising awareness.

**Monitoring Mechanisms**

As with any change, sustainability is critical. The effort to have more women in politics cannot be abandoned once the election is completed. Continued monitoring is required. When strategic moments present themselves, advocacy for increased representation of women in politics needs to be pursued.

After the GDRI had been more or less successful with the integration of women’s issues, including the increased representation of women in decision-making in the policies of political parties and the government, the GDRI found that a monitoring mechanism needed to be established to ensure that such policies were implemented. The GenderWatch Group, a monitoring mechanism, was formed in 1992 by different organizations working for women from different parts of the country, including educational institutions (GenderWatch Group 1993: 4–6). Its primary objective is to monitor the progress made by the government, the political parties, the parliamentary committees and MPs on implementation of policies regarding women. Other purposes involve expanding advocacy, providing a support base for the promotion of the roles and status of women, and heightening the awareness of the significant roles women play in national development.

The GenderWatch Group monitored the government’s policy on job discrimination, which resulted in the appointment of female provincial governors and deputy governors. Women had been barred from such posts and once the barrier had been removed little was done to implement the policy. Had this not been monitored, fewer posts in male-dominated positions would likely have been made available.

A few additional NGOs have been established after the fourth World Conference in Beijing to monitor progress on women's issues. Thai Women Watch was set up, initially, as a loose informal group and later registered as an assessment entity (Thai Women Watch
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2004). Its main objective is to monitor the advancement of women in Thailand, primarily related to the regional Asia-Pacific context. There are 11 critical areas are monitored, including representation of women in politics (Thai Women Watch Group and Bangkok University, 1999: 25–113). Together with SEAWatch (South-East Asia Watch), a regional organization based in the Philippines, they held a series of regional workshops and meetings focused on the development of tools for monitoring and evaluation.

In 1997, 34 NGOs from across the country united under a single umbrella organization called the Women and Constitution Network, establishing another monitoring mechanism. Their first agenda was to enable women to organize themselves, to outline strategies and to urge women to run for election to the Constitutional Drafting Assembly seats. 35 per cent of the candidates were women – the highest ever among national level elections (Thomson and Bhongsvej 1999: 66–67). This network has advocated several women’s issues and set up monitoring devices for these issues.

**Challenges Ahead**

Advocating for increased representation of women in politics has been an uphill battle. Not only does this work brush up against traditional and cultural impediments, it also has very limited resources. Even so, there has been success and much is owed to NGOs focused on women’s issues. The past decade has been the most active as campaigns to have women participate more in politics have been introduced. Additionally, it is evident that there has been significant political manoeuvring of NGOs in producing change conducive to increased women’s participation in politics.

**Lessons Learned**

The experiences of the GDRI and other NGOs in advocating women’s right to participate in politics have provided valuable lessons for future promotion. These include:

- There must be recognition of the need for continued efforts to increase female representation in Thai politics. This has not
been very easy as resources are very scarce and activities launched depend on the availability of funds. Moreover, gaining support for activities related to politics has never been easy, particularly when it comes to supporting women. Even when selected activities cannot be carried out due to lack of financial support, other promotion activities have to proceed.

- Positive and negative experiences need to be documented and those documents distributed. Sharing knowledge is critical in order to prevent the repetition of mistakes and to avoid wasting time developing practices that already exist.

- Success stories are very inspiring and need to be highlighted to the greatest extent possible. Case studies should be conducted to understand the strategies that have led to victory so they can be taught and utilized in elections and other situations.

- A positive approach can be useful for facilitating further changes. Commending good policies and measures or providing positive feedback should increase so that the chance of gaining further support is increased. Appreciation needs to be expressed to those who are involved and who support change.

- Information is needed to convince those in power at all levels. Related information from other countries’ experiences can also be a good awareness-raising tool.

- Systematic planning must be done. The plan needs to be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

- Different strategies have to be employed for different target groups as each has its unique characteristics and interests. Diversity must be respected and embraced.

- Women who have made it to the top sometimes behave the same way as their male colleagues, inhibiting their ability to understand women’s issues and concerns. Not all are progressive and this needs to change.
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- Networking is an important and dynamic force among advocacy groups working to raise awareness on women’s issues. Linkages with other interest groups are instrumental in broadening the support base. Opportunities have to be acted upon, if not created, in building alliances and implementing new findings at all levels of government.

- As long as opportunities to pursue the practice of advocating certain issues are limited, it is difficult to influence governance. Even so, it is necessary to work closely with the national government organizations to understand the political landscape and to acquire access to the power structures.

- Positive developments could result from the establishment of a forum for political parties and candidates to state their policies and commitments prior to elections.

- Policies go unimplemented if monitoring is weak. Changes may take place but not be sustained, which has been the case in the appointment of female provincial governors. When monitoring is not continued, the gains may disappear. Since the first appointment batch, the number of female provincial governors has remained unchanged, if not reduced.

- Perseverance, persistence and attentiveness to details otherwise considered trivial are required in the struggle to increase the number of women in politics.

The next few years will provide interesting testing grounds for organizations working to promote women in politics. The political turmoil from the beginning of 2006, which resulted in the abolition of the Constitution in September 2006, has brought the country to a standstill. Women are now faced with political reform issues as well.

Since the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution, the many political changes that took place resulted in some positive social transformations. People, especially a majority of women, have become much more interested in politics. They have been more actively engaged in
public issues and in what is happening around them. The media has also played an important role in bringing out and following up on many issues that have been in the public interest. With better access and more advanced telecommunications, people have easy access to the media. With the popular radio networks, people are beginning to identify with each other and express political opinions in a much wider circle. The increasing political interest will hopefully facilitate a greater support for the issues facing women and providing them with the opportunity to give voice to their concerns so that society as a whole will benefit and grow.

Areas of Concern
The most urgent matter confronting women in the upcoming year is to advocate for the principle of gender equality in the new constitution, which is to be drafted in 2007. Women also need to ensure that the issues women raise in relation to political reform are discussed and incorporated in the process. Promoting women as politicians will be a priority after the new constitution is promulgated.

Women have not been slow in their advocacy. Comprising about 20 prominent women advocates and as the most recently formed group, WeMove has taken the lead in efforts to put gender equality on the political agenda. The group was formed in May 2006 to advocate for political reform via constitutional amendments, however in the new political context WeMove’s mandate has expanded to cover many other emerging issues, including the involvement of women in all current political reform processes (Women’s Movement in the Thai Political Reform 2006).

Women’s organizations and their allies have been working with great intensity to make their voices heard. Close monitoring of the political moves is required and interventions to make women visible have to be fast. The most recent event was a meeting organized by the GDRI in collaboration with eight other organizations from both the government and non-government sectors. Among them were the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, WeMove and GenderWatch Group.
There were about 1,200 men and women from different parts of the country to share their views and confirm their stand regarding the new constitution. Their main proposition is that the 1997 Constitution should serve as the basis for the new draft due to its comprehensive coverage on rights (GenderWatch Group 2006b: 1–24).

Encouraging women to participate in the political reform process including the drafting of the constitution has been a parallel strategy. Little success has been achieved in this respect. From the takeover in September 2006 until the end of 2006, the number of women appointed to important political missions has been few. Women form about 13 per cent of the newly established National Legislative Assembly. Ten per cent of the recently formed 2007 Constitution Drafting Committee members are women.

To achieve a vision of a transformed society, it is necessary to form a critical base of women holding decision-making power, which forms the foundation for the discussions of the points below.

On the assumption that positive discrimination is incorporated in the new constitution, working for a greater understanding for this measure must be initiated to ensure that women’s access to power at every level is facilitated. Priority must be given to advocating representation based on quota as a short-term strategy in political bodies through elective, appointive, or legislative policies of political parties.

Experience indicates that having women in positions of power does not guarantee that women’s concerns and gender equality issues will be recognized. Observations from women’s organizations find that despite recognition of the need to be familiar with current issues that concern women, this has been given low priority once politicians have assumed their political seats. Those who are gender-sensitive and fully aware of women’s needs and interests may face the dilemma of changing the system while ensuring that policies and structures include women’s perspectives and concerns. If there are too few of them, they will be pressured to conform to men’s views and perspectives in order to be heard and accepted. This kind of
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environment may make it more difficult to bring women’s unique values and concerns into the political arena.

The majority of female politicians come from the upper classes, whose families are established in politics. As members of the elite, they may need to preserve the status quo or share more common ideologies with men in their own class. Alliance-building is key where there is a negligible percentage of women in politics. To effect change for women in legislation and policy, female politicians may need to join hands and work across party lines. It should be noted, however, that in a parliamentary system, members have to follow the party line, which makes it harder for party members as they are locked into the party agenda. The establishment of the Female Parliamentarians’ Group more than a decade ago has been one clear attempt by female politicians – both senators and Members of Parliament – to forward women’s issues. Although the group is not very active at times, there has been a more active commitment during the last two to three years. As a matter of fact, because they are independent, senators could very well serve as a link between Members of Parliament belonging to different political parties to advance the status of women.

Although it is obvious that influencing policies and political decisions through lobbying and other actions taken from the outside has been possible, it is not sufficient. Issue-oriented women must wield power in positions where it matters most: in elected posts.

Advocating for a Greater Role of Governmental Organizations

Only national mechanisms for women have been involved in the efforts to advance women’s participation in politics and their involvement has been limited. In promoting policies for the representation of women in politics, the national machinery has developed indicative plans for women, which unfortunately have not been implemented as the budget has not been allocated for this purpose (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1997: 12)

Particularly at the policy level, lobbying activities are limited as government departments, which are part of the bureaucracy and sup-
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posed to be politically neutral. In women’s movements, the national machinery generally collaborates with NGOs. Their roles are more facilitative and NGOs take a more explicit role in the lobbying itself. As part of the bureaucracy, it is difficult for the national machinery to pursue the lobbying activities right to the end, especially when such lobbying is against the government’s official position. (Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995a: 18)

The government has not undertaken any initiatives to promote increased female representation, for example by starting up capacity-building ventures. There was, however, an effort to promote women in the bureaucracy. The Office of the Civil Service Commission, which serves as the central personnel agency of the government, took the initiative of organizing training specifically for women to prepare them for assuming executive posts (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej 2002: 181–182). In politics, it was also assumed that government departments that are directly and indirectly involved in political development would build women’s capacity, particularly in cases of local government where women were barred from posts as village heads and sub-district heads. Since the abolition of the barrier 25 years ago, there has never been a single effort from the government to assist women to take up the role of village head or sub-district head (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1997: 64–65).

Government departments such as the Department of Local Government do not consider themselves directly relevant to the increased representation of women despite the fact that they are responsible for building up the capacities of local governments. Women have thus never been targeted for leadership training (National Commission on Women’s Affairs 1997: 8).

Significant efforts have been made over the past year to get relevant government departments involved in the issues women’s organizations work for. Examples include the Department of Local Government Promotion and autonomous organizations under the jurisdiction of the government such as the King Prachadhipok Institute. Normally, the government office offers further training for political appointees and elected politicians. Now they are taking
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on the matter of strengthening the political leadership of women (Office of Gender Equality 2003: 16). Another related area, which needs attention is raising gender-awareness among the political appointees and politicians, which could be included in their training curriculum and in all political development programs.

Gender equality in politics has been neglected to a great degree. NGOs by themselves may find it difficult to access political audiences but they can work with government institutions in the effort to create a better understanding of gender-related issues. It is very important that male and female politicians are made aware of these concerns for the successful promotion of women’s role as well as political role in society.

Promotion of Political Interests
Strategies currently employed to increase representation of women in politics without any consideration for the longer term may work temporarily as long as there are resources for continued promotion. Political socialization for both boys and girls is required from early childhood through formal and informal education. School curriculum should include political education appropriate to the age of the students. Politics as well as democratic principles need to be understood as relevant to everyday life.

Negative attitudes surrounding politics need to be changed. Informal discussions with young people who have visited the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women have confirmed that their political knowledge is almost none and they know very little about their rights as stipulated in the Constitution. A general political understanding of politics has not been ingrained through the formal educational system, however there have been some recent efforts by Parliament and the King Prachadhipok Institute to organize youth camps to train young people in the democratization processes, although the scope was limited (WeTrain Training Center 2003: 10).

In fact, if political participation based on equality is the goal, training should start with the educational system. For example, efforts to train female students in political leadership need to be considered.
The government should have policies or programs for children and young adults in relation to politics. Internship programs for students to get political training need to be initiated for students at both high school and university levels. Schools should provide relevant and more intensive political education and to engage the young in political activities.

These are the main areas that still present great challenges in the years to come. Experience has demonstrated that nothing is impossible despite all the difficulties and barriers. Increasing women's representation in the political arena is not just a matter that concerns those women who have a keen interest and capability to be political leaders. It is the responsibility of everyone who would like to see improved policies that redefine power to encompass synergy and strength rather than dominance. Women cannot be left alone in the struggle to reach the political stage. It is a task that concerns everyone.

**CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD**

The issue of increasing the number of women in decision-making has to start with women themselves. If women are to play a leading role in allocating resources and benefits, women have to step up as candidates in the election and for other positions.

Although women's aspirations and commitment are necessary, they are not enough: social and economic structures must enable women's participation, discriminatory laws must be eliminated, stereotypes must be removed from education and mass media, and attitudes have to change to support women in the public sphere.

All parties concerned at all levels must work together to develop appropriate measures. The government has to take its commitments and obligations toward the conventions and laws at both the international and national levels seriously. Policies to increase female decision-makers need to be implemented and closely monitored within specific time frames (Thomson 1994: 9-12). Long term strategies for public education and revising the educational curriculum in order to raise awareness about the importance of having women participate
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as equal partners in development processes have to be formulated and implemented.

Further to this, the political parties need to consider affirmative action seriously and make it their duty to raise awareness of the party members, supporters and candidates of the significance of having women in decision-making roles. Institutions and organizations including mass media need to support the end of discriminatory laws, and at the very least, they need to support women who are ready to move into politics and administration. More importantly, pressure groups have to work to change the preconceived images of women and eradicate existing stereotypes.

Committed collaboration under the democratic principle of government, political parties, and institutions at both the governmental and non-governmental levels and in the mass media, including women themselves, will ensure that the road to power will be equally accessible to men and women.

Quantity is not sufficient, however. As the number of women who choose to compete for positions of power and decision-making increases, more qualified women will have the chance to provoke change and to work for gender equality and equity. The ultimate challenge in the coming years is not merely to place women on the public stage but to change the public view on equality and participation on equal terms. This requires the active participation of the government, political parties, pressure groups and the media in an effort to increase the number of women committed to addressing the concerns of women in the power structures at all levels.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Prohibited Spaces: Barriers and Strategies in Women’s NGO Work in Isaan, North-Eastern Thailand

CAMBRIA G. HAMBURG

Women’s active participation and leadership in civil society is closely linked to women’s sustained, integrated involvement in national politics. Grass-roots civil society associations, such as community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and non-profit organizations have been shown to increase women’s membership in the public sphere (UNDP 2003; Pongsapich 1997). NGOs and similar associations have thus rocketed to popularity as development tools. Katharine Rankin, in her discussion of the use of social capital, speaks of the ‘recent worldwide, nearly evangelical, faith in NGOs and non-profit organizations – rooted in civil society and mobilizing social capital – as the most appropriate institutions to carry out development’ (2002: 4). The logic is that grass-roots, community-based development can foster sustainable poverty reduction more efficiently and more legitimately than top-down national government approaches.

NGOs and community organizations are, however, imbued with tension when it comes to development work that challenges existing gender hierarchies. Grass-roots organizations are, by definition, situated within the community and must operate and negotiate within
community norms. NGOs working on issues concerning women must confront community practices that reinforce and produce social hierarchies. NGOs are thus sites of gender construction and reproduction, with the potential to uphold unequal gender (and social) relations or transform them. As such, NGOs merit closer examination, specifically: whether a given NGO defines its work as part of the women’s movement or not; what NGOs’ the explicit and implicit goals are; how members of the NGOs go about accomplishing these goals, and what obstacles they face; and what all this conveys regarding conceptions of womanhood and women’s needs in the given context.

This chapter discusses women’s NGOs in Isaan, north-eastern Thailand, with the above-mentioned questions in mind. During my fieldwork I learned that women’s participation and leadership in NGOs was positively related to women’s involvement in politics and, more generally, the public sphere, yet increasing women’s participation in politics was not the stated goal of any of the organizations I surveyed. This points to the covert and tactical nature of some NGO’s work. NGOs in Isaan operate in a context of community culture, which functions as both a development trend and cultural backdrop, fostering NGO practices in Isaan that are different from those in Bangkok. Women’s NGOs in Isaan negotiate these distinctive cultural constraints strategically. An examination of the barriers women’s NGOs face and the ways in which they handle them sheds light on dominant notions of Isaan womanhood and how Isaan women conceptualize their NGO work, feminism, and women’s empowerment.

I begin by outlining Thailand’s development context and NGO growth, briefly showing how women’s NGOs in Isaan have helped to increase the number of women involved in the public sphere. I operate with a broad definition of ‘women’s NGOs’, referring to NGOs, or sections of NGOs, which work primarily with women and/or on issues concerning women (see footnote one, above). These NGOs are usually, though not always, headed by women. In the following sections I describe the changing gender ideology in Isaan and put forth a categorization of women’s NGOs in Isaan.
Next I examine the ways in which NGO leaders define their work, discussing definitions of feminism, and I explore the barriers women’s NGOs face when trying to enact change. I conclude by focusing on the strategies women’s NGOs employ to negotiate these barriers and continue their work of empowering women, reducing gender inequality, transforming gender relations, and supporting women in the public sphere. Some NGO women leaders use their social positions to their advantage, propelling themselves to the forefront of environmental NGOs. Other NGOs manage to reach and engage women by tactfully focusing on issues other than ‘women’s rights’ or ‘empowerment’.

Throughout this chapter I have attempted to make the voices of the women NGO workers themselves heard, hence what might be viewed by some readers as an over-reliance on quotes. For this chapter I draw on nine weeks of fieldwork in Isaan during which I interviewed 25 women NGO leaders and male and female NGO employees in the northeast provinces of Khon Kaen, Roi Et, Udon Thani, Chaiyaphum, and Surin. This survey is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather hopes to refocus the attention NGOs in development receive on some of the actual women workers, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ.

SENATOR RABIAPRAT
The story of Senator Rabiaprat Pongpanit helps to explain how issues of women’s rights are sometimes dealt with in Thailand. Khon Kaen Senator Rabiaprat is a women’s activist, member of the Senate Committee on Women, Children, and the Elderly, and known for her vocal campaigns against the practice of men taking second wives (quite common in Thailand) and for the ordination of women as monks. In early July 2004 she visited Wat Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai, one of the most important temples in Lanna (Northern Thai) culture. Based on her gender she was denied entry to an inner area of the temple that contains relics of the Buddha. When she urged religious officials to reconsider this rule she touched off a controversy that occupied the front pages of Thai newspapers for several weeks.
Rabiaprat argued that the rule violated her human rights, which should apply to everyone regardless of gender, and that the rule was unconstitutional (*The Nation* 5 July 2004). Despite her framing of the issue it quickly became one of ethnicity and religion: she was charged with not understanding Lanna culture and not being a good Buddhist.

A senator from Chiang Mai opposed the removal of the ban, saying there was a ‘limit to women’s rights.’ He said, ‘for hundreds of we’ve had beliefs and local Lanna traditions stating that women – no matter what their social status is – can’t access sacred areas’ (*The Nation* 6 July 2004). Women I talked to in Isaan were embarrassed for Rabiaprat, and while many agreed with the removal of the ban, they felt that she had clearly gone about it the wrong way. One friend said,

If someone wants to prove that women are strong, then she should climb the highest mountain in the world. But this belief is in a social space. You can’t ask for equality in a belief. It’s stupid to do that. You can’t just go out and demand that.

The extent of the national backlash surprised me. Senator Rabiaprat received spiteful mail and was the subject of hate speeches. People participated in rallies and protest marches, and one march culminated in the burning of a dummy in effigy. Finally, she officially apologized and withdrew her request.

This event illustrates a way in which arguments concerning gender equality are often subsumed by other discourses in Thailand, as well as the consequences of a decided lack of finesse when pushing for social change. While women NGO leaders are in a similar position and face these same challenges, women I interviewed said they tried to avoid taking such a controversial stance. Perhaps this is because Rabiaprat’s high social status affords her a degree of insulation that cannot be expected by middle- and lower-class women in Isaan, who make up the bulk of NGO workers.

**DEVELOPMENT AND NGO GROWTH IN THAILAND**

Between the 1970s and 1990s, Thailand transitioned from a military dictatorship to parliamentary democracy, opening up spaces for
civil associations, NGOs, academics and activists. Development in Thailand was in full swing during this period, averaging a real growth rate of 7.5 per cent per year for four decades (1957–1997). The average per capita income increased by 600 per cent, and Thailand was earning a name as Asia’s fifth tiger economy. Development was largely top-down, urban-biased, and conducted by a highly centralized and bureaucratic government (UNDP 2003). These boom years saw the acceleration of natural resource depletion, deforestation, and industrial pollution. The livelihoods of many rural people, previously based on subsistence agriculture, shifted to a dependency on wages from new industries and factories. Rural women, in particular, flocked to factories for work. This capitalist transformation and concomitant degradation of natural community resources continues to have far-reaching effects on community culture and gender relations. I will discuss these elements in Isaan more specifically below.

Non-governmental organizations grew at this time as well, recognized for their abilities to bridge private and public sectors, providing services that the government neither can or will provide, filling infrastructure and political power vacuums, and contributing to civil society and associational life. (Simpkins 2003: 254)

Many NGOs formed out of the vacuum created by the October 1976 massacre and consequent devolution of the organized Left. From 1976 through to the 1980s, numerous communist activists threw in the towel and turned to grass-roots community-based NGO work instead. Two streams of NGOs emerged. One stream assisted activists and people’s movements while the other concentrated on influencing policy-making in Bangkok (UNDP 2003; Simpkins 2003). The government even encouraged NGO formation, as NGOs met gaps in government services and alleviated poverty, which was seen as a cause of communist expansion. The government also gradually drew some second stream NGOs into its decision-making processes.

Both streams of NGOs advocated a ‘community culture’ approach to development work. The community culture discourse emphasizes the importance of local knowledge, village self-reliance,
tradition and community harmony, and sees development as a way of helping to protect and build the community (Nartsupha 1991). This approach is respected and used among rural NGOs today (less so in Bangkok), though now it is also coupled with human rights discourse and, for some leaders, Buddhist values (UNDP 2003). I will discuss Isaan ‘community culture’ in further detail below.

Government-directed development, however, continued to be top-down and bureaucratic.

The economic bubble burst in 1997, devaluing the Baht, sending migrant workers back to their villages, and impoverishing millions. In response, the King introduced a new approach to development that emphasized a ‘philosophy of sufficiency-economy’ characterized by balance, sustainability and justice. More NGOs adopted community-based strategies, and this decade saw the emergence of a new institutional context in which the idea that the community could serve as the basis for reversing the inequitable top-down development strategy was brought firmly into the mainstream (UNDP 2003). The Eighth and Ninth Plans of the Thai government, as well as the 1997 ‘People’s Constitution’, promoted rights important for community empowerment, such as access to natural resources and a mandate to strengthen local communities and promote participation in national decision-making (UNDP 2003). Such an institutional shift mirrored the growing importance that international development agencies had begun placing on civil society, communities, social capital and NGOs as key agents of development.

Women-led NGOs began in the 1950s and were mainly housewives’ associations promoting cultural heritage and charity causes. During the 1970s boom years, women’s professional groups emerged, organizing to support middle-class working women. These organizations were usually grouped around healthcare and business, which were areas seen as extensions of women’s traditional spaces such as family care and managing the family money. The 1980s saw a departure from these associations as women organized more progressive, action-oriented development associations, heavily influenced by the worldwide feminist movement and the 1975 International
Women’s Year (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1991). In 1985 and 1995 the NGO Forum was held concurrently with the Third and Fourth World Conference on Women, and the women’s movement began to emphasize the importance of grass-roots community-based women’s NGOs (Pongsapich 1997). The representation of women in high-level positions in corporations and public office has scarcely improved in these past decades, though Bangkok-based NGOs are more vocal than ever about existing gender inequalities and women’s issues.

During my fieldwork in Isaan, women’s NGO interviewees mentioned, unsolicited, that they thought more women should be in public office and active in community public affairs. Maa Malee said, ‘I agree that women should try to go into political work. We need more women politicians, and seats should be set aside for women.’ Maa Yai Ratree backed this up:

I think we should have more women in government. Women should try to do more in public at every level. Politics are not just for men. Representation necessitates the women’s point of view also.

Women’s NGOs in Isaan are already helping to achieve this aspiration. Results from interviews show that women who are involved in women’s NGOs are more likely to take on community and leadership positions and/or run for public office. Maa Yai Ratree, from an environmental NGO, reports that in the sub-district administration office she was the only woman at first, five years ago. ‘But now there are seven,’ she smiles. All are members of the NGO. Maa Yupin says that her income-generating NGO has led to more women leaders as well:

Before this group existed, there were no women community leaders. But today women in our group have become village leaders. Women gain confidence through this process of entrepreneurship, and are more willing to take on public roles.

The efforts of NGOs in the north-east give women skills and confidence, and increase their legitimacy as leaders. Curiously, however, I found no NGO in Isaan whose stated goal was to increase
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women’s leadership or involvement in politics. What forces are at work behind such a puzzle?

THE ISAAN CONTEXT

This section is intended to give the reader some understanding of the Isaan context that is relevant to discussions below. Unfortunately, space does not permit a detailed investigation into Isaan society and culture. Isaan is the name of the ethnic and linguistic minority (Thailand’s largest) concentrated in the north-east of Thailand. The Isaan language is roughly a combination of Lao and Thai, and older Isaan people still call themselves ‘Lao’ while members of the younger generation more often refer to themselves as ‘Isaan’. The northeastern region is Thailand’s poorest, and the word for poverty has become synonymous with Isaan in Thai society. Although there are many cities in the north-east, Isaan is largely rural and agrarian and as such its people face derogatory stereotypes and marginalization. Mary Beth Mills (2001) explains this in the context of Thailand’s obsession with modernity and the ways in which prestige becomes attached to being thansamay, or ‘up-to-date’. Fulfilment of modernity is often achieved through the subordination of regional, ethnic, and linguistic variations to a standardized Thai identity for which Bangkok is the model (Mills 2001: 33). Isaan regional styles and language provide the fodder for popular media images of the backward country bumpkin. The media stereotypically portrays Isaan women as ugly, stupid, and only good for work in the factory (Khun Sunetaree, personal communication, July 2004). Isaaners have fought against these derogatory images by attaining high levels of education, procuring wage jobs and moving to Bangkok, however people have inevitably internalized these stereotypes as well. Many NGOs in the region say one of their goals is to work on community members’ ‘self-confidence’ and ‘Isaan pride’. Researcher Christ Lyttleton (2000) points out, however, that Isaaners are also considered warmest and most generous of Thai peoples. A common Thai expression describes them as wide-hearted: khon Isaan jai kwang (Lyttleton 2000: 25).
Historically, Isaan has been a stronghold of radical politics (Phatharathananunth, 2003). The Free Thai Movement was highly active in the northeast in the 1940s-60s, and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) chose the region as its headquarters in the 1970s and retreated there after the massacre of October 1976. A decade later, farmers and students in Isaan became disillusioned with the CPT and withdrew support. I found that most NGO people I interviewed did not want to align themselves with either the right or the left.

Gender roles in traditional community culture in Isaan emphasize the complementary roles of women and men, with each having their respective sphere of responsibility (Whittaker 1999; Pongsapich 1997). Women are mothers and in charge of land and household resources, while men govern religious and public affairs. Traditionally, daughters inherit land and houses while sons receive movable capital. The youngest daughter usually takes care of her parents in their old age, and upon their death receives the house and the parents’ share of the land. These designations are reflected in the bride-prices of daughters. Fertility and nurturing are also important sources of female cultural power: a woman earns merit through giving birth, while men do so through the monkhood. Women cannot become monks, therefore nurturing one’s child is linked with a woman’s social identity (Whittaker 1999: 46). Women are thus associated with the home, land, and domestic realm.

In the Theravada Buddhist worldview, to be born male indicates the child has more karmic merit than if the child is born female (Lyttleton 2000: 128). Only men have the opportunity to become monks, the highest, most virtuous source of merit in the village. Men are also expected to dominate public activity. In general, men are considered upholders of the moral order and protectors, thus their social assets are tied up in the regulation of women. If a woman commits adultery it is her husband who loses face. Men generally hold all official political appointments such as headman, assistant headman, and members of village committee. If a woman is elected or appointed to one of these positions is it usually in the capacity of secretary.

While these gender roles and norms have always been changing and reforming in Isaan, the advent of capitalist development marks
a sharp and speedy transition, intensifying, remoulding and transforming gender concepts in light of new market forces. The advent of wage labour has disadvantaged women, argues Andrea Whittaker, devaluing domestic work:

Under older system of common production, men and women shared the benefits of their combined labour in the fields and in the home. However, under a system of wage labour, a large proportion of women’s work in maintaining the household and caring for children is not paid and they are thus increasingly dependent upon male wage earners for support. (Whittaker 1999: 44)

Wage systems only value work that is paid, undermining women’s work and status.

When sons and daughters migrate to find work, daughters are expected to send back remittances to their families more often than sons are. In general families expect more of their daughters than they do of sons. One interviewee put it this way:

Women have all the burdens. We are supposed to be good daughters, good wives, good mothers, good grandmothers...We must do this to get respect. Men just have to earn money, and that is good enough. There are no other expectations. Women have all the burdens. (Maa Gung)

While people previously attained prestige from cultural capital, with men and women doing so in their respective ways, capitalist transformation of this region has brought a shift to attainment of prestige through economic success and consumer goods (Whittaker 1999: 57). Though the domestic sphere has become devalued women are still responsible for it, leaving them at a disadvantage when it comes to trying to achieve these economic successes. Women are also involved more than ever before in productive roles and at the same time are the most vulnerable. Simultaneously, gender norms are under negotiation as the lives of men and women change.

It is in this context of re-negotiation, transformation, and consolidation that women carry out NGO work. Women’s NGOs in Isaan respond to these changes through the types of programs they
choose to execute, such as an income-generation project or a savings group, and they also take part in the production of new meanings through increasing women’s participation in the public sphere.

**Organization of Women’s NGOs in Isaan**

Studies that examine NGOs in Thailand rarely discuss women’s NGOs specifically, and surveys of women’s NGOs often fail to take regional differences into account and universalize the Bangkok case. Women’s NGOs in Bangkok can be characterized as having a high level of interaction with political systems, engaging in consciousness-raising, and overtly advocating transformational change (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1991). By this definition, it is no wonder that some commentators believe that few, if any ‘women’s NGOs’ exist outside Bangkok. In Isaan and outside Bangkok generally, NGO work is community-based, multi-issue, and informal, relying on shared cultural frameworks and utilizing concepts such as social capital. This context, along with other barriers discussed below, make it difficult for women’s NGOs to be overt and vocal about women’s empowerment. Yet women’s NGOs do exist in Isaan and do enact change, specifically, contributing to the increase of women’s participation in the public sphere. Reports that women’s NGO actions are only ‘Bangkok-based’ (see Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1991: 158) are misleading and ignore the subtler forms of women’s work in other regions of Thailand.

While there are some NGOs in Isaan that work exclusively on women’s issues, most are multi-issue and work with women as part of a larger project. In fact, some of the most empowering programs for women come about through environment-oriented NGOs or community groups whose stated mission has nothing to do with empowering women or working on gender equality. These NGOs are therefore *indirect* when it comes to working for women’s empowerment, contrasting with *direct* NGOs whose articulated purpose is to help women (the latter being the norm in Bangkok). The prevalence of indirect NGO work is perhaps not surprising considering the community-based, multi-issue, and informal culture of these NGOs.
and the debated meanings of women’s empowerment work within the NGO scene and in the public eye in Isaan.

NGOs in Isaan are immersed in community culture, an approach in vogue with Thailand’s new institutional culture described above. Nartsupha describes community culture as ‘kind-heartedness, brother/sisterhood, generosity, mutual-help, not taking advantage of others, unambitiousness, non-violence, self-reliance, honesty among Thai villagers [that] remains strong, especially in the villagers in Isaan, the Lao North East of Thailand’ (1991: 132). While this development approach is important and can be effective, an uncritical espousal of community norms and values discourages change and ignores the ways in which these norms delineate and restrict women’s NGO work. Often the very goals of women’s NGOs, such as women’s empowerment, self-reliance, mobility, political participation, pose a challenge to existing gender hierarchies embedded in a community’s cultural framework. As I will continue to illustrate below, women’s empowerment work is often seen as upsetting ‘brother/sister harmony’, overly ‘ambitious’, and selfish. How do women NGO workers overcome these stereotypes of women’s empowerment work? Women NGO leaders in Isaan have learned to traverse community norms strategically. Maa Siriporn, a coordinator of a network of NGOs, explains:

When you are talking about [women’s rights issues], it is ok to talk openly like this in Bangkok. But you can’t use the same dialogue in Isaan. You need to find the north-eastern context, the north-eastern detail. If you talk in the right way people will listen.

Much women’s NGO work in Isaan is thus indirect: women NGO workers expertly manoeuvre themselves, using tactics like the use of terms like ‘participation’ instead of ‘rights’. In this context categorizations of ‘nationalist’ or ‘liberal’ NGOs (see Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1991) fail to capture the community-based aspect of NGOs in Isaan and the ways in which women employ strategies to negotiate restrictive community norms. This is not to imply that women’s NGOs in Bangkok do not employ strategies as well or that they are
free of cultural constraints, for all work against gender inequality involves challenging existing cultural norms. Rather, I wish to illustrate differing circumstances and the way in which cosmopolitan Bangkok is often assumed as the norm. It may be helpful to think of Bangkok as an ‘open’ space, more pluralist and with a higher degree of conflict, where NGOs form around a specific issue and women’s groups frame their goals explicitly in terms of women’s empowerment. In contrast, Isaan is more ‘closed’, characterized by a strong sense of regionalism, communalism and ethnicity, networks of NGOs, highly contextual community-based associations, and multi-issue agendas, creating a context in which some women activists call their work feminist and others do not. In following sections I will elaborate the different ways Isaan NGO workers conceptualize their work and goals.

An alternative categorization of NGOs in the north-east is needed. The following classifications are useful for NGO identification and analysis, and are not intended as evaluative categories. Women’s NGOs in Isaan may be categorized into three groups, namely welfare organizations, *ngan yen* (‘cold work’) organizations, and *ngan raun* (‘hot work’) organizations. Welfare organizations work on social issues such as domestic violence support in hospitals, financial support for HIV-infected women, women’s volunteer programs for the children and the elderly, charity programs for orphans, and so on. The leaders of these organizations I interviewed tended to use victimizing language, talking about ‘targeting’ women, ‘helping’ suffering women, and ‘saving’ women. There was little encouragement for women to help themselves, such as through peer-counselling or skill-building training. Most of these organizations focused not only on women but also on children and the elderly, saying that such connections were ‘natural’ and ‘made sense’. The women I interviewed who work for a particular one-stop crisis service for survivors of domestic violence were passionate about the issue and particularly keen on changing attitudes to domestic violence (namely that it is a private issued and should be ignored). Workers in welfare NGOs defined women’s problems mainly as being low social status, un supportive cultural norms (such as blaming survivors of rape rather
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than the aggressors) and lack of mobile economic resources. They see women’s needs as increased community support.

Ngan yen, or cold work, refers women’s NGO work that creates little or no conflict with the state or community. This is the category most NGOs fall under: ‘less trouble!’ laughs an informant. Women are active agents in the programs, usually running the programs themselves. Examples include savings groups, housewives groups, and income-generation projects (IGP) such as food processing, animal raising and weaving. NGOs provide training, skill-building workshops, and equipment. These NGOs see a lack of resources and capital as the main problems women face and work to ‘increase women’s participation’ in the community and gain ‘economic security for women’. Many of these NGOs engage women indirectly. Saving groups, for instance, are theoretically open to everyone but commonly made up of over 90 per cent women (Khun Sanit, personal communication, August 2004). In communities with active savings groups, women are more likely to be found in leadership positions and supporting each other, yet the stated purpose of such NGOs is often gender-neutral. A successful IGP can generate a great deal of village pride in and respect for the women members.

Ngan raun, or hot work, indicates high-profile, fierce activist work, usually centred around a natural resource dispute. An all-too-common scenario in Thailand occurs when a community feels industry is threatening their livelihood by building a dam, paper factory, or mine in or near their village. Often the company’s activities degrade nearby farmland and use up or pollute the water supply. Villagers mobilize, often forming an NGO, to protect themselves and fight for their rights. Campaigns such as these often serve to unite the community more closely. Women are usually at the forefront of these movements for several reasons. Paa Sirichan, member of a land-rights NGO, says, ‘Over the land rights issue, most of the fighters were women. Land inheritance is passed down through daughters, ja bow, so this is a woman’s issue, close to them.’ Women rely on natural resources for cooking and domestic tasks, and thus are primarily affected by natural resource depletion. Another reason is that many
village men migrate to earn a living for their families (often because the environmental degradation means they cannot earn a living in their community) and are not at home to fight (Lapanun 2003b).

Traditionally women are associated with the land in many ways and are thus more likely to protect it, according to interviewees. Also, many women think that women are simply better at this kind of work:

I think women have more tactical and negotiation skills in meetings. We know how to say no in several ways, in softer ways. We won't get mad easily like men. (Maa Yai Ratree, environmental NGO)

When women leaders have to confront opposition, or are under pressure, women are smarter in solving problems, have better concepts and ideas, and are keener than male leaders. Women find better ways out for all at that stage. (Maa Neung, environmental NGO)

I would like to stress here that the contention is not internal to the community. Rather, the community is united against the outsider, usually industry or the central Thai government.

Women leaders in these three groups of NGOs also come to consciousness about women's rights in different ways, according to one informant. Women who work in welfare NGOs see the ways in which women are oppressed and come to work for NGOs on their own. Cold work NGO workers start income-generation projects for economic reasons and come to realize that changing current gender roles is an important part of effective IGP strategy. Hot work leaders also realize that mobilizing women is key to fighting big issues, and women from these groups think that they come to consciousness about women’s rights and human rights faster than cold work NGO workers.

DEFINITIONS OF ‘FEMINISM’

How is the discourse of women’s NGO work in Isaan articulated? Do women NGO workers call themselves feminist? What does this term connote in Isaan, and how is it used (and abused)? Looking into these questions sheds light on the central topic of this paper,
of how women strategically negotiate gender boundaries in order to carry out their NGO work. In general the term ‘feminist’ is disliked in Thailand and often explained differently, for it tends to connote confrontation, male-hatred and individualism (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1991). The women NGO leaders I interviewed conceptualized feminism in one of two ways, depending on whether or not they described themselves as feminist. Overall, most hot work NGO women described themselves as feminists, while only half of the cold work and welfare NGO women did.

Women who don’t identify as feminists tend to think of feminists as women who are only interested in helping women, as opposed to working with the whole community:

I am not a feminist … I want to talk about notions of balance. Balance of the masculine and the feminine are very important. Some feminists can’t accept this. They talk about equality, but only want equality for one. (Ba Yai, NGO consultant)

Pee Gob, from an urban network, reflected that ‘I am interested in working with the whole community, not just women, so I am not a feminist.’ Feminism is located externally in relation to local culture, and is associated with the legal system. Though feminists are not necessarily unwanted, interviewees described Isaan community culture and feminism as incongruous. The problem with feminism is not that it is Western, since interviewees situated feminism in both the West and Bangkok, but rather that it is not part of Isaan community culture: ‘I want equality for human beings, not just for women … I think feminism is Western style. It’s not our culture’ (Maa Witcheyaa, savings group). Maa Sudajan (an AIDS NGO volunteer) said, ‘If we try to apply Western definition of feminism here [Isaan] it is too difficult. They can talk about it in Bangkok, but here we have different belief’.

Just because many women NGO leaders do not describe themselves as feminist does not mean that feminists are not appreciated. Pee Gob, a coordinator for an urban network, does not describe herself as a feminist but says:
Feminists are more important today because the community culture and community ways of doing things are weaker. They are weaker because there are more influences from outside groups, from central Thailand. These outside knowledges, projects, ideas, et cetera, are working against our community culture. And now laws are playing a more important role in people's lives. [Traditionally] in Isaan older women hold everything of value. But now the law doesn't uphold this traditional system. So the feminists work against laws like this that discriminate.

A concurrent and more negative image of feminists is that they are women who are out to get nothing but power, women who drink, smoke, sleep around and just want to be like men. This popular notion of a feminist blatantly transgresses gender roles and gender-based expectations and threatens to brand all women who dare to question the status quo. Women NGO leaders worry about being labelled with this stereotype, and are thus more likely to distance themselves from feminism: 'No, women leaders aren't feminist. Feminists want legal changes and abstract, big power just for women. We don't focus on that' (Maa Yupin, weaving NGO). Similarly:

When we use the word like 'women's rights' or 'women's freedom' it's like we are demanding something we shouldn't get, an abstract power that no one has. The word is very aggressive, too demanding. So, we will talk about responsibility, power, participation. (Maa Sudajan)

There is a stigma if a woman is too strong. A female politician, for instance, is considered 'big' or ambitious. It's better to work behind the scenes or else we will be attacked. (Pee Baum, weaving NGO)

The unnatural, 'big' and 'abstract' power that feminists are seen to be demanding shows how deeply ingrained are notions of specific gender roles and a gender-based division of labour. If a woman shows interest in serving public office (transgressing a male-dominated space), or stands up for her rights by publicly accusing an abuser (defying the ideal of the submissive woman), or tries to enter a certain part of a temple, she is stigmatized. Women NGO workers must negotiate these realities.

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Some women respond to this naturalization of gender norms by forging an alternative definition of feminism. Women who call themselves feminist frame the word in human rights terms, and talk about working for the rights of women in a way that doesn’t mean power over men:

Yes, I am a part of the women’s movement. Because for me the women’s movement is every issue in a woman’s life … I think the word feminist makes me more aware of women’s rights. We shouldn’t think husbands have control over women, and, for example, permit domestic violence. I think feminism means human rights, not just women’s rights. (Maa Neung)

For me, I think being feminist is understanding and protecting human rights, not for myself but for all women. We understand our responsibility is not just in the household – we can to more than that. I want to be a new role model for younger women. (Maa Yai Ratree)

We need to find a new path of culture for women so they don’t just follow boys, so they don’t just misunderstand equality. Today girls are more progressive. Women and girls need to forge their own way. It is not right to become mad and be violent like men. We need a new path. The new conception should be of social awareness, education, opportunity. (Maa Manee.)

Women’s NGO work, as I have broadly defined it, on the whole is not considered feminist and it is not necessarily seen as part of the women’s movement. There is no overall consensus on this topic, not even within a given NGO. Rather, women NGO workers debate this question on an individual basis. Women leaders of hot issue NGOs are the only social group I identified that consistently called themselves feminist and described their work as part of an overall women’s movement.

**BARRIERS TO NGO INVOLVEMENT**

The definitions of feminism identified by Isaan NGO women foreshadow the barriers they face when conducting NGO work. All interviewees named community culture and prevailing attitudes as
the main challenge women face today, and pointed to gender roles and women’s unequal burden as the reason why more women aren’t active in NGOs. Again, we see how the notion of women’s primary space as the domestic realm shapes both NGO participation and NGO agenda:

Women don’t want to stay away from home too long because they have many responsibilities and will worry about their household duties... Women won’t enjoy the training if we take them away from home all day.... It’s hard to get women to come to meetings, so we try to make house visits and create a friendly atmosphere. Also, when the husband is a committee member and is away all the time for trainings, meetings, the women must stay at home and pick up the slack. (Paa Tik, agricultural network)

Culture is a major issue when it comes to women and inequality. Everything, the division of labour, profession, family roles, it all shows that men’s work and position is more valued [than women’s]. I think Thai people see men as the dominant gender. We keep on focusing on what men can do and value that rather than what women do. (Pee Gung, women’s network)

Some interviewees named men specifically as the main problem holding back women. Maa Yai Ratre says, ‘There aren’t more women leaders because there is not enough acceptance from male leaders in every level.’ Paa Sirichan argues that the main problem facing women is men because,

the family’s, community’s, and men’s attitudes challenge women leaders and try to control them. Men are afraid that if they let their wife travel around she will sleep with other men or people will talk.

This last quote is particularly significant. Respondent after respondent said that women were hesitant to become leaders because it meant working and travelling with men other than their husbands or relatives. They said that people would begin to gossip and ‘back talk’, and assume the woman was using her job as an excuse to see a lover. Of course, when men have to travel for their jobs this is not a problem. One male agricultural NGO worker says,
Women aren't happy when they have to stay away from the home and outside of the community. Campaigning, they might have to mix with a male leader. Traditionally women always travel with other women or with their family. When they mix with other men it will cause uncomfortable situation. Husbands don't like that, won't be happy.

Men are the upholders of moral order, and it is permissible for them to regulate women’s sexuality and mobility. Maa Neung describes the issue as she sees it:

It is a cultural thing. When you go out of the village to do work, you mix with male leaders, and people will back talk and think it is an excuse for an affair. Women are very reluctant to risk getting this kind of reputation. We must accept that the people have a negative impression of women leaders because they have committed adultery when they have the opportunity. But it is the same with men! Men and women both will sleep around if they have the opportunity, but there is a double standard.

If women commit adultery it is seen as more serious because we can get pregnant. Men only want to take care of the kids they are sure they have fathered, so a man is seen as having a reason to shelter his wife and enforce husband’s rights. A husband would lose face if his wife got pregnant by someone else, or if it was rumoured she was sleeping around. Men get suspicious.

This is a serious and rather hidden barrier to increased women’s involvement in the NGO movement. Thus it is not surprising to find that the most prominent and dedicated women NGO leaders are above child-rearing age. Older women also have fewer domestic responsibilities. In sum, these barriers define women’s NGOs, both restricting women’s involvement and influencing NGO goals and strategies.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMANHOOD AND NGO STRATEGY

The sections above illustrate the rigidity of gender demarcation and anxiety over noncompliance. Women are responsible for household chores and child rearing, and activities that take them away from these
duties are viewed as ‘causing the family to suffer,’ according to multiple informants. Maa Witcheyanee, a savings group leader and mother, says, ‘The family is a woman’s responsibility … If you go out you have to leave the children. This is not good, and it might hurt the family.’ Additionally, women are the bearers of their family’s identity and culture, often represented through specific patterns in weaving:

Weaving is important in Isaan because it defends and protects the identity of communities. Women have this responsibility in every part of Thailand, not just here. Weaving preserves the ethics and ethnicity of the family and community. Each family, each village has its own traditional pattern and style. Weaving reproduces the identity of the community. (Pee Baum, weaving NGO)

In this capacity women are the protectors of the family, a notion that informs much of the NGO work that women take on.

As noted in a previous section, women are also the managers of family money and the land, and viewed as ‘softer,’ and better negotiators. Maa Neung says,

When women leaders have to confront opposition, or are under pressure, women are smarter in solving problems, have better concepts and ideas, and keener than male leaders. Women find better ways out for all at that stage.

All of these conceptions of womanhood figure prominently in considerations of NGO strategy. Take women and family money, for example:

A predominant strategy NGOs employ to reach women is to form a group around economic issues, such as a savings group or an income-generating project. Because handling the family money is women’s duty in Isaan, women are quite likely to be interested in such groups and join. We use savings groups as a tool to increase women’s participation … If we say we are running a ‘women’s power’ training, or ‘women’s rights’ training, women won’t join. But, if we say we are holding an IGP training they will join and we can teach them skills. The can build up women leaders through this process of using IGP as a tool. (Paa Tik)
Such groups serve as a point of entry into other, more sensitive arenas and issue areas. Women can discuss their problems in these groups and help each other out. Women I interviewed said they gained confidence and respect through successful income generation programs, while leaders of these programs said they saw more women willing to become active in the community or village leaders after experience in the program. Maa Malee boasts, ‘Since I have become the leader here, more women have self-confidence.’ Such IGPs are even changing gender roles, at least to a small degree. Women say that when an IGP is a steady source of income, male family members are more willing to take up household duties in order to support the women involved in the program. Maa Yupin, from a Roi Et weaving group, speak about the impacts of the program:

The impacts of the NGO project has been more income, learning how to work in groups, learning about marketing and entrepreneurship, discovering our group power and status in community. There is community pride for our artwork and skill and people support use because of this.

Like IGP and savings groups, agricultural NGOs know they have to engage women as well as men in order for their messages to be implemented:

If you deal with only the husbands when teaching sustainable farming practices, you can’t change the way people do agriculture because the women own the land and are in control of the land. The woman gets advice from the government, and won’t change unless you include her in the trainings. (Paa Sirichan)

These cold work NGOs realize that changing gender roles and specifically targeting women are important aspects of effective strategy. ‘The underlying concept is step by step,’ says Pee Gung from the women’s network. ‘You can’t just go in and tell women they can walk on the moon.’

Hot work NGOs also recognize the importance of changing gender roles. Women activists form networks with other environmental activists from other regions, sharing advice, tactics, and encourage-
ment. Men are expected to help out around the house to support women who are organizing. Social rules are bent and men and women activists travel together to Bangkok to lobby the government.

In building campaigns, hot work NGOs put into play both women activists themselves and also the societal concept of ‘woman’, with her domesticated softness and superior negotiating skills. Hot work NGOs deliberately put women on the front lines.

In any political campaign, there are mostly women, because we need women to confront the policy, women on the front line, to soften the movement, make it less strong. If men are on the front line, there will be violence. This is the strategy; this is the real situation. (Paa Sirichan)

Male leaders will get assassinated, shot, but when women speak the opposition thinks the movement isn’t as strong. I don’t think they would try to murder a woman leader. From our view we have a strong relationship and network among women. There are many people to investigate, work, organize the movement. (Maa Yai Ratree)

Women are not merely the ‘face’ of the movement, however. They are also significant contributors as leaders, planners, key coordinators. Outraged by an industrial company’s contamination of the water supply in her community, Maa Neung took action and organized an oppositional watchdog NGO. Maa Yai Ratree worked with other community leaders to prevent a company from building a mine next to her village, which would certainly have led to water supply contamination and increased soil salinity, endangering rice crops. Environmental NGOs I surveyed reported that at least half of their members are women, and many of these movements have women as the leaders. This is a marked departure compared to cold work NGOs, in which many of the women’s organizations are tangential to a larger project. For instance, a farmer’s housewives group may be part of a larger sustainable agriculture NGO, and a savings group is often a branch of an urban network program.

Why is it that hot work NGO women can afford to take on key leadership positions, call themselves part of the women’s movement,
‘feminist’ even, and not become stigmatized like Senator Rabiaprat? It is precisely because of their feminine softness, which carries a valuable currency in the world of hot issues. Women are able to take on strong public leadership positions, breaking a gender boundary in one sense, because they are doing this in a capacity of another gender ideal, as mothers and wives, defenders of family, land, and livelihood. This notion of Thai womanhood is less constructed as it is produced, activated by the phenomenon of hot work women leaders.

Maa Neung, one of the leaders of an anti-paper mill organization, speaks about women and hot work environmental issues:

Negative environmental impact to the family life is something women become aware of right away, and our awareness about human rights rises faster and deeper than women in IGP or a cold issue ....There were many women involved in the P______ Movement. Women use the water more than men, and it is easier for women to notice the changing water quality and surrounding environment. Women also notice changes in water quality from domestic use. We will notice the link when we wash a baby in river water and then the baby develops skin rashes... In villages with conflict [with an industry] women will be very strong. Women have a silent sort of power. When things are all right, women are quiet. But when someone is in trouble, like our neighbour’s land or our children, then women will step forward first.

The conception of women as defenders of the land and through this designation, leaders, is more than a simple extension of women’s traditional roles as farmers. It represents a marked departure from previous conceptions of womanhood, from notions of passive, domesticated wives and mothers to public leaders in their own right. Because of the significance of this step the path is not without struggle. Women in leadership positions still face stigma, the back talk, and innumerable other obstacles. The severity of the situations hot issue NGOs are formed around makes the actions of women more necessary, however, and perhaps even the stigma more bearable. Maa Yai Ratree says, ‘While there is the idea that women are quieter and subservient to men, we know we will rise up when we have to’.10
CONCLUSION

In Thailand’s struggle towards true democracy NGOs are experiencing increased recognition as a gateway to national politics, a mode of development, and sites of transformation. NGOs that tackle gender-sensitive initiatives are key determinants of the discourse of the women’s movement and producers of conceptions of Thai womanhood. Women’s NGOs in Isaan have the potential to enact community-based change of hierarchical gender roles and relations. These NGOs cannot afford to alienate the communities they serve, and must negotiate notions of Thai women that place them firmly within the domestic realm and thus outside the public realm.

Though traditional gender ideology in Isaan values the respective spheres of men and women, capitalist transformation and industry-led development have contributed to the devaluation of women’s domestic work. Women’s NGOs are responding to these changing times in a variety of ways. Welfare NGOs work to protect women from the consequences of having inferior social status, such as domestic violence and exposure to HIV/AIDS. Cold work NGOs give women economic, manufacturing, and management skills. Hot work NGOs help communities fight for their rights and protect their families and livelihoods. Indirectly, all these NGOs work to empower women and challenge existing gender relations. As such they face a number of barriers in their work, based on debated conceptions of Thai womanhood. Women who are overtly feminist and want to be active in politics risk being labelled as power hungry and manly. Women NGO workers who try to empower women are charged with ignoring the rest of the community. Perhaps most seriously, most men view women’s involvement in NGOs as evidence of promiscuity, and disapprove of their wives’ participation.

The NGOs I surveyed deal with these obstacles in a number of ways. Women’s welfare NGOs choose non-confrontational approaches such as support services, charities, and orphanages. Cold work NGOs, though working to equip women with skills necessary to become active politically or independent financially, couch their work in gender-neutral language. Hot work women leaders use traditional
conceptions of women as protectors of the land, family, and livelihood to justify their place in the forefront of political movements. Thus women’s NGOs have enacted strategies that have increased women’s opportunities to enter the public sphere, a previously restricted space.

These strategies are different from the more overt, direct lobbying approaches of women’s NGOs in Bangkok. Though Senator Rabiaprat was from Khon Kaen, a city in Isaan, as a senator most of her time is spent in Bangkok and her tactics reflect the more open and confrontational environment of the capital. The regional context of north-eastern Thailand implies a stress on harmonious community culture, and NGOs are community-based and, in the case of hot work NGOs, at odds with the central government in Thailand. Women are less likely to break with their male counterparts, and feminism is often couched in terms of ‘outer’. Whether the organizations I surveyed call their work feminist or not, however, is a non-issue.\footnote{What is important are the ways in which Isaan women are helping themselves and defining their work, as I have aimed to present here. A leader of a women’s network sums it up:}

\begin{quote}
We have to analyze women as survivors of oppression and look to the power of women to create change for ourselves. We need to be conscious of where the power of women is in our work.
\end{quote}

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\textbf{AUTHOR’S NOTE}
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Research for this paper was funded by a Fulbright Grant and carried out with the support of the Gender and Development Studies program at the Asian Institute of Technology. I wish to thank Dr. Barbara Earth for her supervision. I also wish to thank both Khun Patcharin Lapanun at the Khon Kaen University Research and Development Institute and Khun Sunetaree at NGO CORD NE for their encouragement, support, and inspiration. Finally, I am indebted to all the NGO activists who took time out of their busy schedules to share their stories, views, and thoughts with me.

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\textbf{NOTES}
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1 Issues concerning women that NGOs often take on include legal rights for women, labor protections for at-home manufacturers, economic
security for women, education, elimination of domestic violence, support and advocacy for female sex workers, natural resource protection and management, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, women in politics, healthcare, and so on.

2. All names are fictitious, though I have preserved the interviewee’s kinship title, a customary prefix Thais often use. For older women, for instance, villagers preface an individual’s given name with Ba (aunt) or Maa Yai (grandmother). The title Pee (older sister/brother) denotes that the individual is older than the author at the time of the interview, that is, older than 23. People referred to as Maa (mother) or Paw (father) indicate that the individual is married and has children. Khun is a respectful prefix, literally meaning ‘you’ but used in lieu of ‘Mr.’ or ‘Ms.’ in Thai.

3. This trend had four main advocates who were highly influential: Father Niphot, Bamrung Bunpanya, Aphichat Thongyu, and Prawet Wasi (Nartsupha 1991).

4. The Friends of Women Foundation, the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, and the Women’s Information Center, all based in Bangkok, are some organizations that are quite vocal and lobby the government for change.

5. While the classification of NGOs that I am about to propose can be applied generally in Thailand, the defence of such a claim is beyond the scope of this project, which focuses on NGOs in Isaan.

6. The words yen and raun, meaning cold and hot in Thai, are prominent in Thai language and used to connote more than just temperature. Thais strive be jai yen, literally ‘cold hearted,’ the opposite hot-hearted. To be jai raun means one is rash, insensitive and boorish, and is generally something to be avoided. An individual who embodies jai yen is seen as reasoned, cool, confident, fair and capable.

7. See Earth 2005 for the case of the Phoenix Pulp and Paper Mill; see Lertchoosakul 2003 and World Commission on Dams 2000 for information on the Pak Mun Dam conflict. Regarding the Anti-Potash Movement in Udon Thani against Canadian company Asia Pacific Resources Ltd see Coumans 2002.

8. Some women interviewed had heard of the term ‘feminist’. The closest translation in Thai is probably sactri niyom, an academic term that means ‘promoting women’. Another word I used is siti sadtrii, meaning women’s rights.

9. Issues of promiscuity and adultery are bound up in numerous facets of Thai social relations, including understandings of HIV/AIDS trans-
mission. Women are often blamed as transmitters of the disease, and HIV/AIDS is commonly referred to as the 'Love-Your-Wife Disease' (rok rak mia). See Lyttleton 2000 for an excellent analysis of Thai sexuality and HIV/AIDS discourses in Isaan.

10 Over the past few years the image of the 'strong, female environmental activist' has been gaining recognition in Thai politics and society. Some academics have voiced concern over this growing iconization of women environmental leaders, fearing such an emphasis could be used instrumentally to dominate the agenda of the women's movement.

11 Raising this question sheds light on how women's issues are viewed and articulated in Isaan. Although Women in Development/Gender and Development theorists tend to get hung up on the word, it is only important if leaders in the Thai women's movement decide it should be, and currently there is no consensus.

REFERENCES


—— (2003b) ‘Natural Resource Management and Women’s Coping


Women and Politics in Thailand


CHAPTER FIVE

A Glimpse of Women Leaders in Thai Local Politics

JUREE VICHIT-VADAKAN

INTRODUCTION

The matter of women in local politics in Thailand is not a well-researched area of politics. Although there are a few studies on this topic, more than half of these are MA and PhD dissertations (Boonsong 1998; Marpaneet 2003; Noppabhadiol 2001; Piyaporn 1999; Prateep 1985; Rawiwans 1997; Sasiporn 1996; Smira 1986; Supaporn 1993; Suthinee 2002; Voralux 1995; Yoawalux 1997). Not a single study can, however, be cited as an authoritative study. Women candidates were allowed to enter local politics only 25 years ago and the topic is therefore relatively new compared with national politics, where women were allowed to stand for election more than 70 years ago. As a matter of fact, women in national politics is also an area in need of further research and study.

This paper will provide a glimpse into women’s participation in local politics in Thailand. The paper will use profiles of women leaders at the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO), which is the lowest level of the administrative system in Thailand, where leaders are elected by the local citizens. By looking at some of these leaders, one can shed light on whether or not women’s role and participation
in local politics can be understood and analyzed. Each Tambon covers a certain number of villages. Tambons vary in size and budget allocation, and are grouped into different tiers. Larger and wealthier tambons may eventually be classified as a municipality. The current classification system is not precise, which casts questions on the usefulness of the classification system at all.

At the lowest level, the traditional system of village heads remains. This local leadership structure has been in place for a long time. The Ministry of Interior was and continues to be in charge of local administration. The village heads and sub-district heads are accountable to the Ministry of Interior via the assistant sub-district officers and the district officer. As village and sub-district heads they are also responsible for their constituents’ immediate needs, hence village heads and sub-district heads play dual roles, having to balance between promoting local villagers’ needs and demands and having to follow the orders and dictates of their superiors from the Ministry of Interior.

When examining the studies on this topic, there is a somewhat limited range of issues surveyed and questions asked. For example, one common theme studied involves the perception or views people have of local women politicians. This theme should focus on what factors contribute to the acceptance of women leaders, for example their personal attributes, performance, or capability (see Noppabhadol 2001; Pornpen 2005; Piyaporn 1999; Prateep 1985; Rawiwan 1997; Smira 1986; Supaporn 1993; Voralux 1995). The second theme deals with the factors which promote or deter women from entering local politics, asking what factors are enabling factors, and why some women take the plunge into politics (see Boonsong 1998; Noppabhadol 2001; Smira 1986; Suthinee 2002). The third theme regards the leadership and performance of women politicians at different levels within the local government context (see Prateep 1985; Suthinee 2002).

While the findings of these studies are interesting, they are not altogether unexpected. There is a lack of ingenuity or creativity in exploring new dimensions. The exception would be the latest study by Pornpen 2005), which is titled *A Study of Direct Stakeholders’
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Opinions toward Women’s Local Government Participation in Thailand. The title is somewhat misleading as it sounds like yet another opinion survey on women politicians, but in reality it is an interesting study using qualitative research methods in interviews that elicit stakeholders’ opinions about women’s political participation in four TAOs from different regions in Thailand. This study provides some depth on the factors affecting women’s opportunities to win elections or to become a TAO member. Barriers or obstacles that women candidates face are also identified in this study, which shows that differences in physical, socio-cultural, economic factors affect the expectations and needs of women politicians. In other words, women politicians’ personal attributes, their ability or capability, and their performance vary according to the level of socio-economic development and the urban or rural nature of the TAOs. Hence, intervention strategies to promote women’s participation in politics also need to vary to make them suitable to the segmented contexts. New possibilities emerge, enabled by this study, for improved future studies and for a better understanding of this topic. It also paves the way for a more innovative approach towards intervention to increase the number of women in local politics. Government organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to increase the number of women in decision-making positions operate according to conventional standards and they may not have designed their programs, projects and intervention strategies with enough consideration of the differences found between people in society. This study points to the need for diverse strategies and programs as well as for more careful targeting of the women to be promoted through study and analysis of the socio-cultural, economic and physical environment of the areas in which promotion and intervention are to take place.

The Collected Data
The data used in this paper comes from two sources. The first source consists of secondary data collected from written materials such as MA and PhD dissertations, journal articles, newspapers, websites
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and other printed materials. These materials were mostly written in Thai.

The second source consists of primary data based on personal interviews and opinions expressed in workshops collected over several years. Data on life histories or profiles of some women political leaders in local government come from personal conversations collected over many years. Primary and secondary data were used in combination.

I have also summarized, extracted and sorted out the major points and salient issues from previous studies by using my own interpretation and analysis of the data. In the many workshops, seminars, conferences and training sessions held on women’s issues over the past two decades, many of the ideas and findings here may have been expressed, analyzed, proposed, transmitted and reproduced in one form or another at one time or another. In fact, some opinions expressed by women leaders reflect the degree to which they have been made conscious about gender equality and mainstream gender concepts.

A Summary of the Existing Literature on Women in Local Politics

I have organized and grouped the themes discussed below for analytical purposes. In the original studies, the categorical distinctions may not be as clear-cut and some of the themes overlap or are not mutually exclusive. Suffice to say that the analysis of these studies is based on my understanding, interpretation and analysis of these studies.

The earliest study of the views of individuals and groups on women in local government was conducted only a few years after women were first allowed to take part in elections for village heads and Tambon heads (Prateep 1985). In this and a subsequent study, the focus was on how well women performed as local leaders. Although the men were initially reluctant to accept women as local leaders, there were signs that women leaders’ positive role and performance will lead to acceptance. Generally, there is a stereotypical perception of women leaders as flexible, good coordinators, having the ability to persuade and convince others through gentle, unthreat-
en ing language and behaviour. These attributes may indicate women leaders’ position *vis-à-vis* others in a horizontal relationship and not a vertical power relationship. Soliciting support, cooperation, and collaboration seem to be what women leaders do routinely, which probably make them appear as less of a threat in their approach (Rawiwan 1997). In fact, it is likely that the reason women leaders operate horizontally with their peers – on equal terms – rather than exercising power in their relationship is that the villagers perceive women’s request for contributions of both cash and labour as a negative aspect of women’s leadership (Smira 1986; Rawiwan 1997).

In a society where citizens have been taught to wait for state agencies’ support and assistance in a top-down manner, it is understandably difficult for many villagers to adjust to the notion of self-help by participating in problem-solving strategies. Populist policies and promises from politicians before elections tend to perpetuate a culture of dependency and individual inefficacy, hence when women leaders urge villagers to contribute money or labour for the common good, villages are generally either unprepared or unwilling to do so.

A common question asked, often to women leaders themselves, is whether women politicians are accepted, which suggests that it is an interesting subject to many people. This issue will be addressed in the profile of women leaders given later in this chapter. The question at hand is a question women leaders are aware of and part of their work is to build acceptance among their male colleagues and in society more generally, including government agencies and institutions. Male chauvinism, societal values and prejudice prevent the acceptance of women as leaders (Surasawadee 2003).

Women leaders recognize some of their own limitations, such as their lack of training and their limited experience of speaking in public (Voralux 1995). Self-confidence, being news-oriented and well-informed on public issues, having some knowledge and understanding of the law, especially bureaucratic rules, regulations and procedures become quite crucial for women leaders’ success and performance.

Women leaders can be divided into different categories. Women leaders’ personal attributes and personal capability can be distin-
guished when they are good at what they do. A more problematic dimension involves women leaders' performance, especially the results of their performance. Many admit that even though women leaders are well coordinated, well-mannered, sincere and hard working the acceptance of women's performance results is still low (Boonsong 1998; Piyaporn 1999; Rawiwat 1997; Smira 1986; Supaporn 1993; Suthinee 2002).

In one study, the researcher claimed that educated men accepted and appreciated women's role in politics more than uneducated men and that younger men also accepted women's role in politics more than older men (Piyaporn 1999). If this trend continues, there is reason to be optimistic that the acceptance of women as leaders will continue to grow since education levels are increasing in Thailand.

**The Necessary Conditions for Women’s Entry and Success in Local Politics**

Not surprisingly, women’s entry into politics tends to be based on age, experience, family and even kin support as well as being well-prepared to confront challenges. Family duties and obligations such as taking care of young children deter women from getting involved in politics. Their life partner, their children and the extended family need to be supportive or at least agreeable to women’s involvement in politics. Women with little money or in financial trouble will not stand as the logical choice or as a strong candidate. Women with no previous track record in civic engagement have not proven themselves as a leader and will not be given the public endorsement and approval that is needed. Experience is highly valued, especially for women, breaking into a male dominated field.

Although wealth is not absolutely necessary for engagement in local politics, none of the studies have attested to the fact that anyone without money can compete successfully. In fact, in this study I have observed that the higher the level of politics, the more resources are needed. The monthly income of women elected as village and sub-district heads and TAO members seem to be around Bht10,000-15,000 monthly. The remuneration for positions as village head, sub-district
head and elected TAO chair or council members is insignificant (not exceeding at most a couple of thousand baht per month), so a woman leader’s monthly income must come from other sources. It is interesting that while local politicians are expected to perform their tasks well, they have to serve on a partially pro-bono basis. All three women who serve as mayors at the municipal and city levels in this study are financially comfortable and have considerable resources, as will be shown in their life histories later on in this paper.

For women to be successful in local politics, the following conditions must be present:

- Public speaking skills and self-confidence. It is interesting to note here that when women leaders at the TAOs are being ignored and undermined by their male colleagues, many admit to a loss of confidence.
- Support from family, kin group, local leaders or political party.
- Having initiated programs or projects that succeeded.
- Good relationships with external agencies and persons, where they can recruit external assistance to further local causes.
- Being informed, especially having access to information from the outside world, which can help them make good decisions on the local level.

Problems and Obstacles Faced by Women Who Aspire to Enter Politics

Aside from problems like male chauvinism, socio-cultural values of male supremacy and male dominance in the public sphere, women leaders also face the following problems:

- Laws, regulations, procedures which are difficult and unnecessarily opaque and hard to understand, especially for those not well educated or familiar with bureaucratic culture and systems. In fact, men in local politics have the same problem.
- No real understanding of their roles and responsibilities, including the realm of possible actions and rights that they can exercise.
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- Uneasy and uncomfortable relationships between many elected leaders and with the permanent bureaucratic staff members.
- Divisiveness and conflict in many TAOs, which create tensions for all in the TAO.
- Negative feelings towards their male colleagues, especially with regards to men’s drinking habits, unethical behaviour or lack of commitment.
- Local constituents’ lack an understanding for elected women politicians’ effort, resulting in their efforts being unappreciated.
- Uneasiness with the procurement system where men dominate and where corrupt behaviour often occurs.
- Negative feelings toward the permanent officials who are seen by some elected women leaders as incompetent, tardy and uncommitted to public service and the notion of public good.

There has only been one PhD dissertation on the issue of whether or not local level women politicians bring different values to the realm of politics and whether or not they have made a difference in the administration. Marpraneet’s dissertation (2003) titled ‘Gender Differences in Representation of Sub-district Administration Organization (SAO) Members in Kalasin Province’ tested a set of hypotheses but was unable to prove that women leaders helped to advance women’s issues and agendas. From this dissertation, one can conclude that there was no significant difference between men’s and women’s role in local government. The women politicians did not understand why it was important to focus on women’s interests or needs. It was as if gender was a non-issue and female leaders did not need to act or behave differently from male politicians. On that basis, women leaders studied in that thesis did not do things differently from the male politicians.

It is interesting that the other studies that I looked at in the course of writing this chapter have come up with different findings. Observations by women politicians at the local level point to the differences between male and female politicians’ interests and em-
WOMEN LEADERS AT THE TAOS
Let us begin at the consideration of women in politics at the local level by looking at the profiles of women leaders at the sub-district levels. There are currently two parallel leadership systems at the sub-district level. The first one is the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO), which has a council and an executive committee whose members are all elected by villagers from the villages that comprise the sub-district or Tambon. The TAO is the lowest level of the administrative unit, where the budget is allocated and decisions are made. The TAO is designed to serve as a level of government where important local decisions can be made. Citizens’ participation at this level was perceived to be critical to the democratic process. As the sub-district is close to home, villagers can exert their rights and demands, which creates a responsive local government sensitive to their needs. Members of both the TAO executive committee and the TAO council are elected by members of the sub-district.

The second system is the traditional system of sub-district head and village head. These two positions are accountable to the district officer and the sub-district officers from the Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior. In the past, these two positions were given long-term tenure and were restricted to men, with women seen as unsuitable or inappropriate for these positions. The laws changed 25 years ago in 1982, and women were allowed to contest for these two positions. Some women have been successful and some of them have become outstanding village heads and sub-district heads. By and large, these positions are still male-dominated (see Table 5.1).

When the TAO came into existence, it was the result of an intention to decentralize the administrative system of Thailand, to devolve authority and decision-making, including budget allocations for local projects that are suitable to local needs and requirements. Theoretically, therefore, the elected TAO Administrative structure
was to become the leading structure at the local level, however the village head and sub-district head system continue to exist, showing no likelihood of disappearing, and the same is the case for district and sub-district officers. Although the TAO system is under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, it is also supervised by another department, which promotes local administration.

The leaders in both agencies are elected and have fixed terms. In theory, the TAO system is the new system which is in congruence with the democratic system while the village head and sub-district head system is only a supportive system for the district officer. Even today, however, the district officer assumes great power and authority via his role as the representative for the Ministry of Interior, hence the parallel structure may in fact delay the growth and maturity of the TAO system. While it is true that many (if not most) of the TAO elected leaders fall short with regards to the expectations on them as capable local leaders with moral integrity, they have not had the benefit of full support, full development or enough autonomy to learn and mature on their own. The tedious and burdensome rules and regulations imposed on every sphere of their activity are difficult even for the more well-educated and sophisticated politicians, let alone for rural level leaders who often are not well-versed in bureaucratic norms and culture. The local government officials who comprise the regular staff of the TAOs are subsumed under

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>% Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Council members</td>
<td>2,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality Council members</td>
<td>10,167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-district heads</td>
<td>7,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village heads</td>
<td>61,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-district Administrative Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Board chairpersons</td>
<td>6,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• members</td>
<td>127,594</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the oversight of the Ministry of Interior. Consequently, there is often imbalance within the TAO as either the elected TAO superiors over-exert their authority to the detriment of the TAO staff, or as in many cases, the TAO administrative staff, particularly the head of staff, misuse their great power and authority because of secure tenure as permanent government officials and because of familiarity with the laws and regulations, including the administrative procedures and processes. This imbalance of power between the elected leaders and the TAO officials and staff members often leads to tension and conflict. Even when there is collaboration, cooperation or perhaps collusion between the two parties, this may not benefit the local inhabitants, as in the case that the parties share the resources between them at the expense of the local citizens.

There has been a strong tendency for the TAOs to focus attention and funds on physical infrastructure projects. TAOs are notorious for building, repairing and rebuilding roads while giving less money, interest and understanding to social development and improvements in quality of life. Many TAOs, however, have begun to change and have become interested in social development.

The educated, urban public has been critical of the TAOs’ performance. Fuelled by reports of incidents of corruption, conflicts and ruthless competition among TAO power holders and power aspirants that sometime erupt into violence, TAOs as an institution have not been kindly regarded by city dwellers and the central government.

In the context described above, we find some women who dare to venture into the political arena of the TAO. Some have also opted for leadership roles via the traditional roles of village heads or heads of sub-district.

Profiles of Women Leaders at the Sub-district Level
Malichien Pengvong was the first woman to attain the position of a sub-district head (Eujit, Journal of Sub-district and Village Heads 1994). Malichien’s late father had been a sub-district head, and after women were allowed to compete for the position of village head
and sub-district head, Malichien decided to compete for the position of village head herself. It was not an easy decision as villagers were not used to the idea of having a woman as head of the village. It was like going up against centuries of tradition and practice, according to Malichien. She was, however, not deterred because she was accustomed to difficulties. Her parents died while she was still in school. As the eldest child, she decided to work to support her younger siblings and keep them in school. She was determined to be self-reliant, and adhering to the principle of frugality served her well. When she became more self-sufficient, she threw herself into community work by contributing to public activities, which her late father had inspired her to do.

After she had become the village head, the position of sub-district head became available, and Malichien decided to stand for election. Back then, it was a novel thing for women to become a sub-district head or Kamnan. Her strong leadership as a village head was well-known in the sub-district by then and fellow villagers knew that she was sincerely interested in their welfare. Consequently, she was elected as the first sub-district head in Thailand.

By working hard, (she professed to have worked twice as hard as men), immersing herself in the villagers’ lives, and conscientiously and effectively linking the sub-district to the world outside via the bureaucratic channels and resources, Malichien gained the trust and respect of the villagers as well as her supervisors at the Ministry of Interior. Malichien’s initiative and effort in organizing income-generating opportunities and activities for the villagers and her effort to seek additional water sources for the people did not go unnoticed by those concerned. Consequently, her village and her sub-district, which are in a very poor district in one of the poorest provinces of Thailand, gained recognition and received various awards for being an outstanding village and sub-district.

In 1994 Malichien became the first woman to receive the outstanding head of the sub-district award by the Ministry of Interior, which was quite an achievement considering that she was competing against over 7,000 other sub-district heads. It was even more difficult
because she had to compete against so many men in a traditionally male domain. Malichien believed that the trust, respect and faith that the villagers in her sub-district had in her were crucial to her success. While Malichien was ‘hands-on’ in her dealings with different problems, she was also diligent and personable. She was close to the villagers and empathized with their problems, and as a result she was able to help improve the living conditions in a very poor sub-district. In particular, she was able to mobilize external resources to achieve access to water for everyone in the sub-district.

Eaujit T owt omm a received the outstanding village head award from the Ministry of Interior in 1994, the same year that Malichien received the reward for outstanding head of the sub-district award ( Journal of Sub-district and Village: 1994 ).

Eaujit’s father died when she was four years old. She had a rough time in her early life, having to work hard carrying rice in rice mills to support her younger siblings. Eventually she learned to sew and made a living from it, and then when she was 21 years old, she married a man who was a civil engineer and they had a son. She started to help out in the village and was well-liked by her fellow villagers. Her husband and her fellow villagers urged her to run for election as the head of the village. After she was elected she started some new projects by organizing a system of village guards to protect the village. They were given armbands to show that they were on duty. She also coordinated with external authorities to facilitate budget allocations for water and other services, and she organized income-generating groups and a basket weaving group to add to their financial base.

Eaujit remained conscientious in her role as the village head even after her husband passed away four years before she received her award. In her opinion, she had been successful because her intentions towards her fellow villagers had been sincere and because she had used her sweet, gentle and persuasive verbal skills and was thereby able to win the villagers’ confidence.

Malichien and Eaujit were active before the TAO was established. These two women were elected and have served as liaisons between the village and the sub-district as well as with the bureaucrats and gov-
ernment agencies outside the village context. Their ability to represent village needs and requirements to the external world was important. Villagers appreciated leaders who could mobilize resources from the outside world. Management skills were not crucial then as the village and the sub-district were not self-governed in those days.

As time and the political environment changed and the TAO came into existence, a different set of skills became important. Let us examine some of the more contemporary TAO elected women leaders to see if their roles, personal attributes and capabilities are similar to, or different from, the women village heads and sub-district heads that have been profiled.

As the Chairperson of the TAO Sirinporn faced the challenge of putting less efforts into her own business because she needed to devote herself to the TAO (Matichon 25 September 2000: 24). Her relatives were entrusted with the care of her business. Sirinporn firmly believed that TAO success had to be built on ‘love and unity’ among the inhabitants of the different villages in the TAO. In order to move forward, it was important to foster a shared goal for development, with education as the focal point, therefore resources were allocated to the four schools and one child care centre in this sub-district. She also paid attention to other social development activities like a savings groups as a viable local financial institution, strengthening women’s groups, and the elderly. These achievements were possible because of her ability to negotiate with a lot of people. She employed ‘gentleness’, ‘sweet words’, sincerity, integrity and self-sacrifice to make things happen. Sirinporn also talked about the need to have a mentor or a coach in dealing with the regulations and administrative procedures involved in the work she did for the TAO.

There are more brief profiles of local level women politicians that I will describe to provide a personal portrayal of them as human beings and politicians whose experiences may shed light on our understanding and analysis of women politicians in local politics.

Thongdee Pohyong served as a member of the TAO (Surasawadee 2003). Prior to her election, she was active in community affairs. Her claim to fame in the village was her part in bringing electricity to her
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village. Thongdee was thrilled, when through an intermediary, she learned from the Provincial Electricity Authority official that it was possible to set up electricity infrastructure in her village if only her village was willing to assume a portion of the costs. She convinced her villagers to contribute to the cost of the project. Most villagers agreed to the plan and gave it their financial support. Her part in this project inspired widespread acceptance and respect among her fellow villagers. She became an informal leader even before having been elected to a formal leadership position.

In fact, she became more involved in village development activities after her husband, who was a teacher, passed away. Thongdee herself was an entrepreneur, running a beauty shop and other businesses ventures. As a local leader, her home became the meeting place for political canvassers and political campaigns. By listening to the discussions during these gatherings, Thongdee began to learn about politics, gaining informal training or experience by osmosis. Her children had grown up by then, relieving her of household chores and responsibilities, which enabled her to engage in the TAO and other public activities.

Thongdee wanted to pursue other infrastructure projects such as building better roads and bringing in a tap-water system. Perhaps she was inspired by her earlier success in bringing electricity to her village. When she decided to contest in the election, Thongdee was up against three male candidates. She decided against buying votes. Nonetheless, after she won, she had to throw a big feast to celebrate as a form of paying tributes to the villagers who elected her, at a cost of 27,000 baht.

Thongdee’s role in giving advice, soliciting assistance for local projects and mobilizing resources from the outside to help match the local budget brought her praise and respect. When asked if she would like to see more women in local politics, Thongdee was most enthusiastic. In her experience women are reasonable, cooperate and collaborate well and tend to fulfil their promises.

Preeyawat Chaovieng moved to the Udon Thani Province where she made a living as a seamstress (Surawadee 2003). Whatever money
she made, she tried to save and was successful in converting her assets into a house. Her husband, an electrician, had to travel around where his skills were required and where he could find work. Consequently, she was responsible for raising her five children, including a pair of twins, almost by herself. In her efforts to secure her children's future she made great sacrifices to invest in their education and did not hesitate to take out loans to put her children through higher education. While she had only seven years of education herself, she was determined to do the best for her children's education.

Preeyawat was of a different faith from most other TAO women leaders. She is a Catholic and her faith and religious teachings have guided her, especially in her political and social activities. As Catholicism preaches charitable acts and sacrifices, Preeyawat believed that these principles had motivated her to engage in public activities, even before assuming an official position. She seized every opportunity to gather resources to the local area. Preeyawat was instrumental in writing a proposal for projects to get support from the Social Investment Fund. She never turned away from opportunities for self-improvement, taking up opportunities to study children's rights, women's rights and Buddhism. She stood up against injustices that occurred in her village. In her work, she fought to penalize a teacher who slapped students with a shoe. Preeyawat fought to have child labourers properly registered and treated. When the locals needed training and advice, she used her contacts to aid the people of her village in that pursuit.

As a fighter and a fearless advocate for what is right, Preeyawat was determined not to be intimidated by her male colleagues, who outnumbered her in the TAO. In one instance, when the money allocated each village was set at 32,000 baht, TAO members voted to withhold 2,000 baht, but Preeyawat maintained that the full amount should be allocated since she did not want to be part of such a scheme. She also refused to partake in a share of the withheld money as other TAO members intended to do.

Preeyawat pushed keenly for non-physical infrastructure development projects, which have been over-looked and neglected by most
male TAO members. Commenting on the behaviour of many male TAO colleagues she felt that they consumed too much alcohol, were always late for meetings, narrow-minded and driven by their own selfish agenda. Her views on women TAO members were positive: women were careful and cautious with an eye for details. Women try to think and design socially useful projects like income generation schemes and public health schemes to prevent diseases by simple, local means. Contrary to most allegations about women’s indecisiveness, Preeyawat thought that women have helped her to be decisive and to make the right decisions.

When she was criticized for the TAO’s poor performance, Preeyawat stated that she believed that the TAOs could become viable entities if they were allowed to grow, mature and learn. Since the Ministry of Interior, especially the Local Administration Department has been most reluctant to give up its authority and control, the TAOs have been kept on a short leash. Although they are elected and should be autonomous, they have not been able to liberate themselves from the yoke placed on them by the Ministry via the District officers and the provincial authority, according to a leading officer in the TAO.

Preeyawat wanted to be involved in environmental issues as she believed that unsanitary conditions and poor hygiene on pig farms may have caused disease and allergies in the local area. The problem of waste management also needed to be taken seriously.

Uthai Sookcharoen was another woman elected to the TAO (Surasawadee 2003). Her husband gave her a great amount of support and assumed a lion’s share of the house work. Since he was a contractor, he routinely took villagers to hospital for treatment in his vehicle. Uthai’s success in competing for a political position was in part assisted by her husband’s contribution to the welfare of the village in this way. As a result, the villagers repaid her family by taking care of her family’s animals and ensuring they were never lost.

Prior to election, Uthai was active in other civic tasks. She participated in the work to protect the forest, which the villagers appreciated. After her entry into formal politics she became aware of male chau-
vinism and exclusionary or discriminatory practices against women because men did not want women to assume power. In her experience, male TAO members liked drinking too much, had to be prodded to do their work and usually complained about being urged to work, and some men siphoned off public resources for their own use, including public construction materials. She believed that women were more conscientious and responsible. They had an eye for details and coordinated and networked well in pursuit of their objectives. Women were also careful with how they expressed themselves, using the right language and words can help solve a lot of problems.

Uthai realized that after pursuing her task in earnest, the TAO male members and the male citizens came to accept and appreciate her. In other words, male prejudice and discrimination can be overcome by persistent efforts and good deeds. Today, the men listen to her advice and even implement some of her ideas, for example the production of wine from local fruit plantations for local consumption.

Saijai Lertviriyanaprapa was the head of the Executive Committee of the TAO in the Lopburi Province (2006, see ‘Saijai Lertviriyanaprapa’ in references). In 2005, she and her TAO received a number of awards for having applied good governance in its administration and for outstanding child development centres, which provided early childcare. Saijai was quick to point out that the achievements of her TAO came from good teamwork, as she had enlisted every village under her TAO to have a representative on her advisory team. This mechanism helped gain villagers’ support and acceptance of the TAO’s programs and projects. Unlike most TAOs that emphasized physical infrastructure, Saijai put her efforts into education. Her TAO provided the necessary budget to enhance the five schools under its jurisdiction. All students’ costs were subsidized so education was truly free for all (although school fees may not be imposed in Thai public schools, most schools still charge extra-curricular fees and other fees which place a burden on the poor families). In addition, her TAO provided free lunches for all the students. The TAO also supported information technology centres and language instruction by employing teachers from abroad to help teach foreign
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languages. Saijai was keen on initiating many social projects for the good of the TAO. When she realized the locals’ need for the services of a dentist, Saijai created a special scholarship for a local person to study dental hygiene so that a dental specialist could care for the local people. A centre for learning was established to promote further education and an understanding for democracy. Since Saijai felt that villagers may be intimidated by the police station, she coordinated with various parties to enable the presence of a police representative at the TAO office on a daily basis so that villagers could lodge complaints or seek police assistance there.

When the SML, a special government fund, was allocated to her TAO, Saijai devised a scheme to increase participation and to share the resources by breaking it into 31 segments. Each group was allocated 10,000 baht and was to work on a plan for the most useful way of utilizing it. Some groups used it for income generation activities, others used it for clearing up messy, overgrown grass and weeds in their locality, and others used it to improve health by providing shadow boxing or aerobic exercise for the local inhabitants. The flexible approach allowed for the creation of diversified projects to meet the needs of diverse groups. This approach is not generally adopted in Thai public administration, which clings on to the principle of equal treatment and uniformity in service provisions and delivery system.

Reflections and Analysis on Women Politicians at the Sub-district Level

The seven cases profiled above provide a glimpse into the lives, thoughts and activities of women leaders at the lowest level of the administrative unit. Although elected leaders for the Ministry of Interior System (like the village head and sub-district head) require coordination and interpersonal skills to succeed in their work, they are bound by the same socio-cultural prejudice and bias against women as those who are elected to run the TAOs.

What the women leaders have in common, although not to the same degree on several points, include the following:

- The elected female local leaders are usually not young. Most of them are in their forties or more. They have grown children who
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no longer require their time and attention. In fact, the grown children may actually help to relieve their parents of household duties.

• In their earlier years, these women had professed to be good mothers, loyal daughters, and attentive older siblings. Such values reflect Thai women’s concern for their self-image as the upholders of the family institution. Loyalty to family and filial piety have been ingrained in women since centuries past, so women would feel guilty if they were to succeed in their careers at the expense of family harmony and happiness.

• It is crucial for women in local politics to have the support and assistance of their families. The larger, more supportive, and more extensive the kinship network a woman has, the more success is anticipated. At the very least, the chances of being elected are higher. The women in our profile have received support in one form or another from their immediate families or even from the legacy of a deceased father. The husbands of at least two of the women described above actively supported their wives’ entry into politics, having seen how well they performed as informal leaders in the local context. Women whose husbands had acquired some status in the local context as a professional (e.g. teacher, civil engineer) certainly helped these women gain entry into local social circles.

• All of the elected women leaders had taken part in civic engagements of one form or another prior to entering the race for a formal position. They had already demonstrated their leadership ability in their service to the community. They had already established a reputation for themselves as community leaders who have done something for the ‘common good’. It appears that women can prepare themselves for further social and political engagement through various volunteer groups, which function as an initiation to formal political roles. In all, no female political neophyte can enter into Thai politics and expect to succeed, not even at the lowest level.
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- Local women leaders, at least the more successful ones, need to work hard and to show their ability to solve problems. They have to work hard, even twice as hard as men to prove to their colleagues and constituents that they can perform well.

- Most of these women were focused on the ‘common good’ and tried to uphold these goals continually. For example, they worked to thwart a male-engineered corruption scheme and to divert TAO general physical infrastructure projects to social and human development projects. Women’s interest in education, health, childcare, the environment, the elderly, and other creative ways of improving quality of life for the local citizens has been demonstrated in these cases. Successful women political leaders do make a difference in people’s everyday lives when they focus on quality of life and social or human development dimensions.

- Women politicians at the TAO level face male chauvinism and conscious discrimination at a variety of levels. As women in a political role, they confront societal scepticism, suspicion and lack of acceptance, at least initially. In spite of their proven contributions as informal leaders, the public still harbours cultural prejudices against women as formal leaders in the political sphere. Local women politicians who were successful have weathered these storms and have proven themselves to their colleagues and constituents, even to the government officials and the larger public in the larger context beyond the TAOs.

- The elected women leaders believed in the potential efficacy of the TAO and its parallel structure. In other words, while they recognize the limitations and problems that the local systems have, they appear to be optimistic about the possibility for future improvement.

We do not have data on unsuccessful women leaders. Future studies need to look at the women who were unsuccessful to see why they failed. We also need to analyze whether the failures were based on biases and prejudice against women or on other factors as well.
WOMEN LEADERS IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

Moving on from village head, sub-district head, TAO Council members and the TAO Chairperson into the municipal level and wealthy municipal governments, there is a qualitative difference of the elected officials. The two current women mayors and one former mayor of city governments to be profiled here represent local politics from the urban areas. Unlike their rural counterparts, these three women leaders are well educated. They all have a shared history of higher education and successful careers prior to entering politics. All of them are financially well-off, both before and after the election and have not needed to divert their attention from their office to generate money.

Further, they all have a certain elevated social status through marriage, having earned this status in other ways, or a combination of the two. Not unlike their rural counterparts, two of the three women have a background in social engagements, working as civic volunteers and contributing to the ‘common good’. The third leader profiled here has worked her way up in politics for 27 years, from a young council member to a mayor. In this case, dedication to publics causes and learning the ways of politics via actual practice in politics provided her with a wealth of experience and acceptance from the public for her continued commitment to city administration.

Since I know all three women leaders profiled below, most data came from either formal or informal interviews and conversations, even intimate ones with them over the years. Printed sources on them are used as well but not treated as the essential data source (See internet sources on Premrudee and Tuanjai in bibliography).

Premrudee Champunot, the Mayor of Phitsanulok, has won many awards over the years for her various contributions to city governance. She is currently at the forefront of city administration, a much celebrated mayor who outshines her male counterparts. She was elected to serve as the President of the Municipal League of Thailand and has performed her duties satisfactorily.

Tuanjai’s understanding of women’s role in politics has under the course of her personal life and during her career been altered as a
result of her experiences. Of all the women politicians I have studied at the local level, she is perhaps the most concerned about gender equality and the promotion of women’s participation in national politics. Tuanjai prefers to have women work together in the effort to gain equal status to men. If women do not gain political power in a joint endeavour she is not optimistic about the prospects for women’s empowerment in the present political party system or power structure. Tuanjai is also the mastermind and the prime actor in the effort to transform her group, which includes more than 200,000 local level women leaders (who hold formal as well as informal leadership positions) into a women’s political party – the first of its kind in Thailand.

Profiles of Women Leaders at the Municipal Level

Premrudee, Mayor of Phitsanulok

Let us first examine the life of Premrudee, Mayor of Phitsanulok. We will then look at Somjai, the Mayor of the city of Phuket and conclude with Tuanjai, the former mayor and now the leader of local women politicians.

Prelude to Politics: Premrudee Champunot was trained as a nurse and started her career as such, which was a far cry from politics. She married a businessman who later took a keen interest in politics through civic engagement and business expansion. Together, they expanded their business to include a big hotel in Phitsanulok. Their business interests also include a big vocational college. Premrudee assisted her husband in his career through civic activities and engagements. Exposure to social problems and economic woes of the people propelled her to think about finding ways to help solve problems that confront people in their everyday lives.

As a mother and a wife, Premrudee felt that her primary duty was to take care of her family but when the children became older, Premrudee was able to engage in public life. She stood on a strong platform with a lot of support in her quest as she had been active in many social areas over the years, which ensured her a minimal level of leadership experience and earned her respect.
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Not unlike other women with a political legacy, Premrudee was accepted. In the Thai context, a woman who is ‘ready’ for the public role should not be poor or still struggling to get ahead. Premrudee had all the qualifications to make her ready: economic resources, a well-established status and position in provincial society, a record of successful civic engagement and leadership, and grown children who no longer needed her constant attention and nurturing.

**Entry into Politics:** Not unlike many women with similar backgrounds, Premrudee entered into local politics at the city level. Her main objective was to try to improve the administration of the city government, ultimately to provide better services for the people. What Premrudee did not anticipate was the difficulties she had to overcome in order to make a difference. Her life would have been easier if she had decided just to maintain the status quo of city administration rather than initiating new ways or trying to implement real change, but Premrudee took her job seriously and worked for significant change and improvement in the city.

**Major initiatives and steps to overcome obstacles:** Premrudee realized that to establish herself as a mayor and to gain people’s respect she had to take certain steps and make some daring moves. Some of her many accomplishments have been outlined here.

One of her great achievements was cleaning up rafts in and on the banks of the Nan River that flows through the city. Over the years before the big clean-up, rafts of various sizes started to clutter the river, obstructing smooth passage and gradually transforming the area into a semi-permanent squatter community. The two banks of the river became unmanageable and were controlled by the rafters/squatter community. Not only did the situation get worse due to the obvious pollution to the otherwise attractive river, but the rule of law could not be applied in the ever growing rafter community. The safety of passers-by on the banks of the river also became a problem. It was as if the city had given up its authority and control of that section of the city.

Premrudee tried to negotiate with the parties concerned, using reason and gentle persuasion. She pleaded with them to think of the
public good but her initial attempts were not heeded. In spite of the set-backs she remained determined in her pursuit of change. In an attempt to find a solution to the situation, she started to gauge the public’s sentiments about the situation. To her satisfaction she found that the city-dwellers did not like what was happening but they did not know how to solve the problem.

On the basis of this understanding of public opinion on the issue, she became convinced that the clean-up project needed a rallying point, and recognized that health issues could generate broad-based support. Fortified by these agendas which the public would support, Premrudee launched a major campaign to clean up the river. It was an ambitious project. First, she had to secure funding from the central government, not only to relocate the rafters but to clean up and redesign the banks of the river. Everyone was surprised by the size of her budget request. It was around 400 million baht. Her project included making the two banks into an urban park by constructing walking paths around them so people could exercise and enjoy the beauty of the river.

The removal of the rafts became easier as the city residents supported the idea of a scenic river with mini-gardens on the two banks. Moreover, the idea of applying the rule of law in the city was refreshing to the residents. Above all, Premrudee’s campaign also appealed to a sense of pride in the city – to make it beautiful and appealing to the tourists. The project, when completed had given the city a new image. The city residents rejoiced in having a safe, clean and green space for public use.

The city allowed for some restaurants and shops by the river. They are regulated by the city and must comply with certain regulations and pay fees to the city. Anyone who goes to Phitsanulok today will see people strolling on the two banks of an uncluttered river.

Premrudee also managed to transfer the main fresh market to a new location. Fresh markets make up an institution in Asian cities. Before the advent of the western-style supermarkets and superstores, fresh markets were the focal points of every city. Each city has many markets but there is always a main market where fresh produce like...
meat, fish and all other daily consumption items can be purchased. The fresh markets are often surrounded by shops but the central area where fresh and perishable items are sold by vendors in stalls has a fresh daily supply of goods. To keep the goods fresh, water is sprayed on the produce. Ice in abundance help keep the marine produce fresh. In short, the fresh markets tend to be wet, full of odours, hot and congested. Over time, conditions of the fresh market can become unhygienic, unless special measures are taken to prevent it. A comprehensive clean-up is not easy as the market operates on a daily basis.

The Phitsanulok fresh market was no exception to the above description. As mayor of the city, Premrudee wanted a clean, hygienic, modernized market for the benefit of the residents. It was obvious that the market was too small to accommodate an ever-expanding population. It was also apparent to her that the city needed a much greater area for a market to reduce congestion and to improve levels of health and hygiene. When she broached the idea of moving the market to a new site, there was great opposition, especially from those who profited from that market.

Premrudee found a good site, publicized the advantages of the new place, and took the issue to the public. As the altercations went on over the proposed move, Premrudee used both soft and hard tactics to implement the project. Through continued public relations communication she advanced the issue to convince and persuade all parties about the advantages of moving to the new site. Unlike the river clean-up project, it was difficult to convince people that a new market would be better for all concerned. People were used to the convenience of the location and generally did not want to change, nor could city pride be invoked because a market is not a tourist attraction. There was great uncertainty but Premrudee did not waver; she continued to assure them of the benefits of such an adjustment. Eventually, she managed to convince them that a new, clean, larger and more orderly market would serve the city residents’ best interests.

Since Premrudee was convinced that education was essential to people’s lives and well-being, she also came to believe that early
childhood education was critical to a person’s development. Knowing that the Phitsanulok city school system needed assistance and advice from outside, especially on early childhood education, Premrudee scouted around for help. She finally succeeded in convincing the School of Education of Chulalongkorn University (the oldest and possibly the most prestigious university in Thailand) to assist her. An experimental kindergarten system was initiated in Phitsanulok with the help of the School of Education, bringing great pride to the city. More importantly, it elevated the interest, concern and support of the city residents for better education.

Premrudee initiated a campaign to increase citizens’ understanding for the need to pay taxes and to the need to raise the fees charged for services. As is the case in many other cities in Thailand, the fee for a city services like garbage collection was below the cost of delivering the service. While the residents require good services, they are not ready or willing to pay for efficient garbage collection, water treatment, clean streets, and so on. Premrudee decided to reason with the residents about their duties and responsibilities with regards to paying the fees and the need for increasing those fees.

It was a daring effort since she risked turning her supporters against her by asking them to pay higher fees and taxes. Premrudee took a calculated risk, convinced that the city residents needed to understand the financial needs of the city. Again, she launched a public relations campaign. Using various campaign methods utilizing the media, billboards and flyers, she explained her case. She also participated in radio programs to keep the line of communication open, to talk to people and answer their questions. In the end, she was successful and the city residents cooperated.

None of the above projects was easy. Premrudee rose to the challenge, taking on issues which her predecessors had not addressed due to the nature of the projects. Premrudee was advised not to touch these issues because they would be risky for her as an elected politician, but she decided to face the challenges and she combated them with determination, relying on different tactics and strategies. She believed in flexible management but she also believed that some-
times there is a need to show strength in order to be taken seriously. As a woman politician, Premrudee alternated between using gentle persuasion to convince people of her agenda and to impose rules and regulations when needed.

When asked to reflect on her role as a politician, Premrudee thought that her duty had always been to act in the common interest. To her, local government was mainly social development through the improvement of the quality of life for the city residents. Premrudee insisted that women are most suitable for local governance because it is akin to taking care of one's family. She believed that a good local government manager should not see it as a stepping stone toward national government because local government is more about providing services, good housekeeping, seeking solutions to pressing problems that occur within local confines. Premrudee has found it extremely rewarding to be able to manage and control the city's budget and personnel, where she introduced and initiated several human resource development programs and projects for the city staff. The introduction of information technology and the requirement for computer literacy among all city employees is one example of this.

Premrudee promoted the need for self-improvement by studying for an MA in Public Administration on her weekends. Unlike many politicians from national and local levels who clamour for the degree but who are unwilling to take on the workload it entailed, Premrudee took her studies very seriously and attained her degree.

According to Premrudee what defined her success was that she was never arrogant or over-confident. She believed in listening to others, probing and studying problems, and making judgments based on reason. Moreover, she believed that the flexible stance she took made her adaptable to changing conditions. Premrudee also thought that good management requires consultation, planning, human resource development, and organizational development. Above all, she thought that an elected official needs the confidence and trust of the electors.

Hence, Premrudee has never forgotten that her mandate came from those who elected her. Consequently, she made sure to never
be out of touch with them. She would go to them for consultation and inform them of the city’s plans and projects, interested in their input. Phitsanulok was one of the first cities in Thailand to have electronic communication with its residents, including a web page and telephone hot-lines. The residents can email the mayor, and she also communicates with them via regular radio programs.

Looking into the future: Premrudee insists that her role in city government is rewarding and fulfilling. She harbours no interest or aspirations to become a Member of Parliament. Given her fame and record of success, doors will be opened for her in national politics, however, the prospect of national politics does not appeal to her because she believes in what she can do in local politics and is happy to remain where she believes she will be most useful and effective.

Somjai Suwansupana, Mayor of Phuket City
Phuket is an island province in the Southern part of Thailand, known for its natural scenic beauty as an island paradise, visited annually by visitors around the world. In the past, Phuket was also known for its wealth, generated by tin mining and rubber plantations. As the gem of the Andaman Sea, Phuket has been a prosperous island whose inhabitants have continued to enjoy a higher standard of living than most other provinces in Thailand.

Due to the continuous influx of outsiders to Phuket, it is more cosmopolitan and socially and culturally diverse than most other provinces in Thailand. The nature of local politics has begun to evolve, adding complex dimensions which did not exist in the past. Local leadership in the past was concentrated in families of the commercial pioneers who helped build the island, but non-elite members of society have begun to challenge the old elite. National politics have also penetrated Phuket’s local politics, attempting to recruit followers to take charge of local politics. Some headway has been evident but the elite group is working its way back to its former status. Changes in municipal politics seem to have been slower than these changes at the local level, while national political representatives from Phuket also seem to hail from or require the approval of the traditional leadership elite.
Ms Somjai Suwansupana is the current Mayor of Phuket, where the local government has been granted several awards for good governance, especially with regards to the improvements in education. An examination of Somjai’s life and work can contribute to a better understanding of women in Thai local politics.

With Chinese ancestors, Somjai’s father was old-fashioned in many ways, but not in his desire that his daughter to pursue an education. Somjai did not feel discriminated against as a child because she was a girl, which provided her with a sense of self-esteem and confidence, free to do what she aspired to do. As she was unmarried, her parents and especially her late mother who outlived her father, worried about her future. Consequently, Somjai’s mother left her an inheritance and encouraged her brother (to whom she is very close) to include Somjai as a partner in business investments and ventures that he engaged in. Somjai first entered city government 27 years ago with the support of her family, which has lasted throughout her career. With no need to worry about her financial situation Somjai acknowledge the kind of freedom it gave her to pursue civic and political issues.

When asked to be part of a large political team to manage the city government 27 years ago, Somjai was intrigued by the opportunity to work with a group of people with similar aspirations. Many of them were young, had great integrity, and were ready to take action to improve society. Visits abroad, particularly to very poor and desolate parts of the world, left her with a lasting impression, determined to give something back to society. Friends, who recruited her, felt she was genuine and since she was not driven by her own ulterior motives she would make an excellent member of the team. The idea of a woman in politics was somewhat novel then and was neither well received nor supported. Although she was listed second to last on the list of candidates, with only a slim chance of being elected, Somjai beat the odds. Somjai did not have a significant role during her first years in the city’s government, providing her with time to gain some experience in politics.

*Education and social welfare:* It took six years before she had a breakthrough. The then Mayor of Phuket selected her to oversee
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educational and social welfare matters. Somjai was delighted since she had a strong interest in this field and she conducted a thorough investigation of the problems that the city of Phuket was experiencing with education. In time, she came to understand the problems present in the educational system, but she also realized that changes take time and cannot be implemented at once. In order to bring about such changes she worked to convince her colleagues, to change teachers’ mindsets and improve their working environment, and to involve the parents.

Since she was not a charismatic speaker herself, she compensated by employing a careful methodical approach to understanding the problems by thorough investigation and by listening to the people concerned. With the necessary information she came up with an analysis of the factors behind the problems and a range of possible solutions. Due to her hard work, sincere efforts and humble attitude Somjai earned the approval of her more seasoned political superiors, who served as good role models for her in politics. Somjai received informal tutoring and mentoring from many older politicians. The former mayors Kasem Sutthangkool and Phummisak Hongsyok were her role models. During the course of her career she came to appreciate the value of the contributions and the experience of her older colleagues. Kasem taught her the importance of serving the city government with dedication and with no ulterior motives or self-interest. From Phummiska she learned the significance of good leadership, in the form of coordination skills, involving the empowerment of subordinates by decentralizing power and authority to enable effective action. Somjai believed that in order to become a mature and effective politician one needs to go through a period of apprenticeship, and therefore when politicians are too young and inexperienced, they will not make good leaders.

Somjai’s efforts to improve the educational system for the city of Phuket have been successful. In fact the many prizes and awards that Phuket city has received have attested to this success. It not only reflects innovative and creative management but it also reflects courage among the politicians involved, who made experimental changes, which is rare in the Thai political context.
Somjai was determined to upgrade the educational level of city schools. Recognizing that familiarity with computers and foreign languages was crucial to the students, Somjai worked to initiate foreign language learning and computer science earlier in elementary school instead of maintaining the standard of introducing them at the junior high school level. Introducing computer science required investment in hardware and software, as well as education of teachers. It would take too long to wait for a government budget allocation and the standard step-by-step procedures to bring about these changes. Somjai explored the possibilities of alternative methods and decided to cooperate with the private sector. She initiated an open policy for private companies to bid for a program to bring computers to the school. In this arrangement, the school would pay for the courses and instructions the company wished to utilize but would not have to invest in anything. Replacement of broken, outdated machines and maintenance would be the responsibility of the company. This scheme brought computer literacy to a broad base of students and did so much sooner than other methods would have.

As Phuket is a tourist city, foreign language skills are essential. Somjai invited private language schools with native speakers to teach English, and Phuket city school students started to learn English at the elementary school level. After instituting a third and a fourth language requirement Somjai made similar arrangements to engage teachers of other languages, with Mandarin as the preferred third language. The city schools became responsive to the language needs and were able to bypass the constraints and restrictions on foreign language learning faced by most other schools around the country. The success of this initiative leads delegations from other cities to visit, inspired by this development.

To meet the needs of an expanded student population, the city could not wait for the regular budget process to build the necessary facilities (as the city schools improved, more parents outside city jurisdiction tried to enrol their children in the city schools, placing a strain on the city school's physical capacity). Somjai turned to the parents for help and after negotiations they came up with another
innovative and bold move. The parents and the city negotiated with
the Government Savings Bank to provide a loan for the expansion.
The repayment was to be made by the subsequent government
budget allocated for this purpose. It is uncommon for a Thai city
government to enter into such a transaction.

With regards to social welfare Somjai has had mixed results.
To increase the income among women in the poorer areas of the
city, Somjai introduced some ideas for income generating activities
such as the production of batik designs on clothes. Many of these
activities were also linked to the marketing system and the available
network to provide a sustainable income for the women who opted
to work from home, having small children to care for.

Health and sanitation were other areas that Somjai took very
seriously. It was in her opinion the city’s responsibility to provide
vaccination and health care for the poor who could not afford it oth-
erwise. Somjai, however, failed in her effort to improve the situation
for the elderly. Initially, she envisioned a project to link the elderly
to childcare activities within the communities. As mothers need to
work to supplement their income and the elderly need extra income
and a sense of usefulness and dignity, Somjai initiated a community
childcare system where the elderly would look after the children
while the mothers were working. The project failed because the
mothers did not work away from home, so they visited their children
continuously and thereby undermined the role of the elderly as care
givers. Children refused to be with the elderly and followed their
mothers home.

In another project to have poor women make school uniforms
for the students in the city school system, Somjai met with uneven
results. The project did provide income for the people, but such a
project needed ongoing, external intervention and subsidizing, which
is inconsistent with the principles of self-reliance and sustainability.

*Ingredients for success:* Somjai’s success as a politician in local
government can be attributed to her commitment, dedication and
devotion to her work. Having strong support from her family and
her late mother provided her with the necessary time to pursue a ca-
career in politics. To Somjai’s credit, she has been a strong team player. Her sense of timing, knowing when to go ahead and when to wait, has generated respect from older male politicians who became her mentors and supporters. Her social skills were of great value in the effort to coordinate different groups of people and projects in order to achieve goals. Although gentle, soft-spoken and never abrasive, Somjai has proven to be decisive, bold and courageous when important decisions needed to be made, for example being firm with educational officials when she wanted the standards and quality of education to be improved.

As a woman politician, Somjai recognized societal prejudice against women in the public domain but she did not allow it to deter her from pursuing her goals. At the end of the day, Somjai believed the results of one’s work, if effective and performed with the best of intentions, would guarantee public satisfaction and support. She mentioned that even the teachers, who felt that she was hard on them, came to appreciate the improvements in the schools when their children also benefited from the changes.

It is also worth mentioning Somjai’s lengthy and continuous participation in local politics. She has made politics a career, something that most Thai women in politics have not. Women are often leave politics due to disappointments or set-backs such as losing elections, or the attacks on their character and good name that are often employed by political opponents against women politicians. With her increasing fame and her rise to power and stature in politics, Somjai never lost sight of her ideals.

Somjai is determined to continue her work and to strive for improvement. She sees local government as the locus of good governance, the effective centre for good services to the people, and also the foundation for a healthy and strong democratic society. Somjai is happy to remain at this level, where she feels that she is most effective, innovative and useful to society. She has refused, on more than one occasion, to move on to national politics. To Somjai, there is so much work left in the city of Phuket and she is prepared to meet the challenges ahead.
Tuanjai Buraparat is an interesting woman leader in Thai local politics, whose interest and commitment to the participation of women in politics, distinguishes her from most other women politicians. Currently, Tuanjai does not hold any political office but she is a prime mover, organizer and leader of the Women’s Local Government Association, which includes a large number of women in various leadership positions, from the grass-roots to the municipal level.

Tuanjai is of the firm belief that women’s voices need to be heard and recognized in politics. She is also convinced that the current political party system is neither responsive nor suitable to local women’s needs for participation in decision-making. Consequently, over the years, Tuanjai has toiled with the idea of mobilizing women leaders and women voters to seek an alternative venue for political affiliation and expression. Through this association, with a large number of members, including grass-roots women leaders, both women in office and interested and enthusiastic would-be leaders. Currently, Tuanjai plans to transform this association into a women’s political party. Purportedly, she now has around 200,000 registered members. To scale up the association into a political party, Tuanjai recognizes the need to incorporate national figures and personalities, preferably well-known and capable women to give it the wider recognition and acceptance that it needs. Their participation is necessary if the party is to be a viable player in politics. Much greater resources and financing are also needed. More players with managerial skills, modern management know-how, and legal and administrative knowledge are required, so while Tuanjai is busy trying to mobilize and rally the local level women leaders, to organize and create a cohesive party, she is also searching for collaborators and support from the larger cities, especially Bangkok.

Prelude to politics: Tuanjai’s mother had high expectations of her. She had to help out in her mother’s business when she became a teenager and while going to university, and consequently became hard-working and diligent, as well as developing a keen sense for business and entrepreneurship. After graduating from university,
she married a physician and led the life of a devoted wife and attentive mother while working as a civil servant. Due to her sense of fair play and her leadership skills, she was often chosen as a leader, albeit informal, no matter where she was.

Entering politics: Years later, her husband decided to move away from the city to practice medicine in his home province. Tuanjai regretted having to give up her career, which she enjoyed, but duty and loyalty to one’s husband comes first and so she agreed. In the provincial town of her husband’s family, Tuanjai was drawn into the family business. To everyone’s surprise, she was able to manage it very well, cutting losses, making profits, and forging networks of mutually beneficial alliances in business.

People in town began to recognize her as a strong player in business. Gradually, she became a member of the local chamber of commerce and eventually its leader. While in the leadership position, she was instrumental in making the business community supportive and responsive to social development activities. Consequently, she became the favourite of the local citizens, who admired her leadership and ability to address their needs and problems. When there was an opening for local leadership positions, the local citizens urged her to stand for election. Tuanjai happily agreed, although this was not her original plan. She was voted into office in a landslide victory and became an effective mayor of the municipality.

While in office, Tuanjai felt that women needed to be better represented in politics and decision-making. She was well aware of the differences between the concerns of male versus female politicians. She treated the municipality and its inhabitants with kindness and loving concern. Like a good mother, she wanted the best for the municipality, just as she would for her own family. In the same way a mother would sacrifice for her family, Tuanjai felt she would make sacrifices for her municipality. Her performance far exceeded even her own expectations.

Out of political office, and into political mobilization: As her popularity and her stature among women leaders grew, her supporters urged her to seek higher office. The senatorial seat for her province
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would be a logical goal. She would not have to deal with party politics: only her own performance would be of significance as it was not a party-based position. Tuanjai entered the race but was not successful. It then dawned on her that national level politics was a different ball-game. Candidates with shorter track records could be successful if the major political party gave the candidate its support. Money was also a factor. The complications of partisan politics have filtered down to the local level to persuade, influence, pressure or even buy over local leaders, who help to influence the voters.

Tuanjai was crestfallen and so disappointed by her loss that she almost gave up politics altogether. After she reflected on and analyzed the situation, she picked herself up, convinced that Thai politics needed a new path. The local people needed to think for themselves and vie for autonomy from the domination of national political parties and the political system. Grass roots and local citizens, particularly women needed to forge their own path by building a political party system that would represent their needs. The new party should be congruent with particular local level women’s views and visions.

Gender awareness and a desire for gender equality took root in Tuanjai gradually, in with her childhood. Tuanjai felt that even though her mother was strict, she had been gullible and susceptible to the lies and bullying of her male business partners. Tuanjai had to struggle hard, helping with her mother’s business. Gender inequality was blatant in school and at university. She was a capable and intelligent student but male peers took the limelight. Celebrated for her beauty, Tuanjai often felt vulnerable and she had to be careful not to be taken advantage of.

After finishing university, her mother urged her to marry an older, well-established physician. Even though it was not a love match, Tuanjai was determined to be a good wife and mother, however her loyalty and devotion to her husband was not reciprocated. Tuanjai was devastated when she came home one day to find a little girl waiting for her. It was her husband’s daughter, born out of wedlock. Although very hurt by this betrayal she adopted the little
girl and raised her as her own. Although she remained married, she could not maintain the same relationship as before. Tuanjai did not want other women to end up in the same situation, putting their own needs and desires, careers and happiness secondary to that of their husbands. Instead, she wanted a society where women could be independent, a society of gender equality. It was in her opinion critical that women be liberated from the traditional norms of society in order to empower them. Furthermore, women needed to be involved in the decision-making processes in the public sphere, from the local level to the national level so that they could serve as role models to other women and be in charge of resource allocation, policy formulation and implementation, to address women’s problems and needs.

Her simple and down-to-earth message to local level women and women leaders is powerful and effective. It will be most interesting to see how this local level political movement will unfold. The sheer number of local level women leaders affiliating with each other horizontally is an impressive and rare phenomenon in Thai society because social affiliation tends to be vertical in a patron-client structure. Tuanjai’s group defies that normative pattern. Perhaps it is symbolic of new changes in Thai society, in that women can cohere and forge horizontal linkages more successfully than men can. Perhaps because Thai women are not situated in the mainstream of the power structure, they do not have much to gain from it. Therefore women, particularly at the local level, can be pioneers of unconventional methods for redefining politics in the Thai society.

CONCLUSION

Women in local politics inhabit a range of political positions, from the village to the sub-district, municipality, and small or large city governments. Both the voters and the candidates vying for local political positions also vary according to the particular socio-cultural, economic and physical environment in which each political position is situated. In a developing country like Thailand, marked contrasts exist between villages or even sub-districts in poor remote provinces from the complex, diverse and vibrant Bangkok metropolis, however
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Bangkok and the remote TAOs are both subsumed under the local government system. As such, the women and men who participate in local politics can have quite different experiences in terms of education, socio-economic background, and life experiences, outlook, values and mindset.

One common thread that ties all these women together is the constraints on their participation in politics. Socio-cultural and historical antecedents which demarcated the public sphere for men and the private sphere for women is one major hindrance. The values and mindset of the Thai people undermine women's leadership and decision-making ability, and have kept women from venturing into the political domain. Socialized roles of women as the primary caregivers for the family exclude women from active public participation when the children are young. Public scrutiny and the public’s stringent attitudes toward women politicians have all served to keep women out of the political sphere. In the words of a woman leader in a seminar organized for 60 local women leaders in Phitsanulok Province in August 2006, ‘It is difficult for women to do well in politics. But it is even more difficult to entice other women to follow in our footsteps’.

Salient points from this study include the following observations:

• Most women politicians at different levels encounter some barriers and constraints because they are women. This was manifested in their different comments about how the men do not welcome them in the TAO or how the men have undermined their suggestions or proposals. At the higher level, women mayors have to work hard and continuously prove themselves worthy of acceptance.

• Women politicians also recognize that they need to work hard to gain recognition. In fact, this may have motivated some of them to outperform their male colleagues.

• Many women politicians at the local level, especially in the TAOs, look for capacity-building opportunities. It is not easy to
understand the tedious and cumbersome rules and regulations, and the complex bureaucratic procedures and process. Women politicians often need to strengthen their own confidence and self-esteem. They need to build networks to create an environment of mutual assistance and support. Women politicians have asked for support after they have been elected and they have expressed the need for continuous advice and technical assistance. In the words of one woman politician at the 2006 seminar, ‘We need assistance to perform well so that we can be re-elected’.

- Women politicians also need to build strong alliances and create an environment of solidarity. They have much to learn from each other. The experiences of the women politicians described above can help the newcomers tremendously. Moreover, mentorship and inspiration are also important.

- It is interesting that many local level women politicians expressed no desire to excel in national politics, wishing only to do well in the local context. Only one of the ten women profiled in this study aspired to national politics. It is uncertain at this point whether the women were being pragmatic or are truly content to excel in the local context. Could it be an innate fear to compete at a different level? If very capable women politicians remain in local politics, national politics will be void of their contributions. Can successful women in local government fare as well in national politics? We do not yet have answers to these questions.

- One unresolved issue continues to be problematic: if successful women politicians had to be financially independent and comfortable, is politics an exclusive domain for rich women rather than poor women? How can poor women aspire to political participation?

- In this study, I also found that the women politicians I studied tend to have an open style, working with people in a somewhat egalitarian manner, using the tools of communication and listening. They solved problems by going directly to the parties in
question and discuss things, searching for a mutually agreeable solution. In other words, the much talked about ‘sweet demeanour, ‘good language’ and good coordinating ability seem to refer to a style of behaviour which women politicians tend to adopt, congruent with the behaviour prescribed for a well-mannered woman in Thai culture. Using abrasive language or even being direct may rub men and even some women the wrong way in the Thai context. The challenge for women politicians is to appear soft and gentle on the outside but to get things done. Many have succeeded to convince others after using reason and persuasion.

- There are many examples of women politicians’ distaste for corruption. In fact they have tried to stop corruption, or at the very least, tried not to be a part of it. Moreover, some women politicians disapprove of their male counterparts’ behaviour in siphoning off money or even taking construction materials from the public for their own use.

- Women politicians work horizontally in a cooperative and collaborative manner with their constituents, government agencies and male colleagues. It is a style which engenders horizontal affiliation, partnership and mutual benefits. This approach needs to be strengthened and promoted in Thai society where social affiliation is traditionally vertically based in a patron-client structure. Women’s way of operating is in fact more conducive to the building of democracy and democratic values and processes.

Perhaps this is a glimpse of what true democracy in Thai society could look like, but it will only be possible if more women participate in politics. This is a glimpse that merits further in-depth study and presents a way forward.

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CHAPTER SIX

Women as Parliamentarians

KAZUKI IWANAGA

Why is it important to examine differences in policy priorities and interests between men and women in the Thai Parliament? Evidence from the existing research on women and politics shows that women bring unique experiences and distinct viewpoints to the different issues of the legislative agenda. The following questions have surfaced because of these results: Why should more women be elected to the Thai Parliament? Does it make a difference whether women or men are elected to office? What difference would it make for the content of politics? Do women parliamentarians in Thailand have different issue positions from their male colleagues? Is there any evidence that women legislators have distinct policy priorities? Can theories developed in the post-industrialized democracies of Europe and the United States explain the impact of women in the Thai Parliament? This chapter attempts to answer these questions by using the original data collected from the Thai Parliament and interviews.

The available evidence indicates that the increased presence of women in legislative bodies makes a difference not only in what types of legislation are introduced, but also what kinds of bills are passed. The women and politics literature tends to suggest that women make a difference in getting legislatures to give attention to and legislate on issues pertaining to women’s interests and concerns. The literature also tends to suggest that when women serve in larger
numbers in the legislature, they are even more likely to give priority to women’s issues than when they are a small minority.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much of the previous research on the impact of women legislators was confined to studies of state and local legislatures in the United States and national assemblies in Europe simply because there were insufficient numbers of women in legislative assemblies in other parts of the world to allow for analyses of their impact. Studies in the United States and Europe, however, provided useful insights and hypotheses to examine the impact of women in national parliaments in other parts of the world (see Jones 1997; Taylor-Robinson & Heath 2003).

The oft-cited Pitkin research (1967) distinguishes between two different types of representation: the politician who represents voters by what he/she is rather than what he/she does and the politician who represents voter interests by acting for his/her cause. These two types of representation are called social representation and opinion representation respectively (Perkins & Fowlkes 1980:92). Women can be socially represented, that is to say represented by someone who is from their group (a woman) or by a representative of opinion, being a person who shares the same interests and opinions but is not necessarily a woman. In the former case, women are represented by an equal and in the latter by someone who acts in their interest. Building upon Pitkin’s insights concerning the two conceptions of representation, scholars have studied women’s political representation in terms of the links between descriptive representation and substantive representation.

Until the 1980s, most of the research on gender and politics centred on explaining why women were significantly under-represented at various levels of government. Research in the 1980s looked beyond the numbers to study what women can accomplish once they are elected to legislative assemblies. An increasing number of studies on gender and political representation has examined the relationship between the ‘who’ and the ‘what’ of political represen-
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tation – descriptive representation deals with the question of who is representing whom, while substantive representation deals with what is represented. The evidence seems to suggest that as more women become elected (descriptive representation), there will be more evidence of gender-based differences in policy priorities in legislative bodies (substantive representation), since an increase in the number of women would highlight other life experiences with alternative lenses through which to view issues. Studying substantive representation has become something of a cottage industry among gender and politics scholars in Europe and the United States.

Although women’s legislators may be more likely than their male colleagues to represent women’s interests, women may be represented by individuals who have concerns and opinions similar to theirs but are not women. The research has, however, shown that female legislators are often more likely than their male colleagues to act for women or for women’s interests. The available literature tends to suggest that the linkage between women’s descriptive and substantive representation is strong. Upon a closer examination, however, it has shown that the links between these two types of representation are complicated rather than straightforward and by no means guaranteed or automatic: descriptive representation is neither absolutely necessary nor sufficient for substantive representation to occur. Some female legislators are more likely than others to act for women, just as some male parliamentarians are more likely than others to do so. One should also take into consideration factors other than the gender identity of legislators that may promote women’s substantive representation. In this chapter, the scope and focus are mainly limited to women’s substantive representation. Very little research has examined the behaviour and impact of women in the Thai Parliament. To maintain the analytical focus on questions about women’s substantive representation, I refrain from discussing women’s descriptive representation in detail, since this area has already received much attention.

Those scholars interested in the impact of women on public policy claim that women are expected to care more about ‘women’s issues.’ Swers (2002: 10) defines women’s issues as:
issues that are particularly salient to women because they seek to achieve equality for women; they address women's special needs, such as women's health concerns or child care; or they confront issues with which women have traditionally been concerned in their role as caregivers, such as education or the protection of children.

Sometimes women's issues are defined narrowly in feminist terms, while at other times they are defined more broadly as those related to women's traditional roles as wife and mother, caretaker and housekeeper. In general, women's issues are not limited to those concerned strictly with women's rights, economic status, and health. Issues such as children, domestic violence, education, health, social welfare, and the environment are also included.

The existing research confirms that women, more often than men, take the lead in women's issues. Women are more likely to express concern about such issues and take an active interest in them. They are also more likely to serve on committees relevant to women's issues. Moreover, they are more likely to introduce and support legislation addressing such issues (Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1994; Reingold 2000; Bratton 2005).

In addition to giving higher priority to women's issues, research has shown that women politicians may bring a new dimension to the legislative policy-making. In the literature, male approaches to policy-making and leadership are sometimes described as being characteristically authoritative, competitive, hierarchical and manipulative (Thomas 1998, Rosenthal 1998). Female politicians, on the other hand, are more likely to seek and adopt different types of approaches and solutions – ones that rely more on cooperation than conflict, and consensus rather than hierarchical relationships (Swers and Larson 2005).

Many studies have examined whether descriptive representation translates into substantive representation. Some researchers argue that the mere presence of women legislators is not enough to make a difference. The proportion of women in the legislature should be at least a large minority' (Sawer 2000). Many scholars make use of critical mass theory to explain variations across countries in the
relationship between women’s descriptive and substantive representation. They argue that the degree to which women make a difference depends upon their proportions within legislative assemblies (Welch and Thomas 1991; Dodson 1998; Bratton and Ray 2002). The theory of critical mass suggests that when women remain a distinct token minority within a legislative assembly, they tend to conform to male norms, but once the numbers of women reach a certain size, there will be a change in the nature of political discourse and the policy agenda as the minority begins to act distinctively and challenge the patterns of gender interactions (Dahlerup 1988; Bystydenski 1992).

The concept of critical mass, drawn originally from physics and organizational behaviour literatures, has been used by the scholars in the field of women and politics as a theoretical underpinning for explaining women’s substantive representation in legislative assemblies. Even though the representation of women in legislature is disproportionate, Saint-Germain’s (1989) longitudinal study of the Arizona State legislature shows that there is no significant difference in the proportion of bills dealing with traditional women’s issues that were initiated by each sex. Women were, however, more likely to introduce such bills once more than 15 per cent of the seats in the legislature were inhabited by women, thus altering their political strategy. Thomas’s (1994) research also confirms a positive relationship between the proportion of women in legislative assemblies and the likelihood that they will be more likely than their male colleagues to introduce and take the lead on legislation concerning women’s interests.

Other researchers take a more cautious, even sceptical approach to critical mass theory and have found little or no evidence confirming critical mass theory that the influx of a greater number of women into the legislature will increase their ability to act and press for women’s issues. In her longitudinal study of three state legislatures in the United States, Bratton (2005) finds no evidence that a small number of women legislators are any less likely to introduce legislation concerning women’s interests or that they are any less effective in getting
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their bills passed. Some studies argue that, regardless of the any increased presence of women in the legislature, various structural and individually oriented constraints affect the extent to which women can have a significant impact. These constraints include, for example, party identity, the male-dominated political environment, the lack of experience and diverse interests of women legislators (Goetz 1998). In order to determine whether women legislators act for women, it is important to place them within the actual working environments in which they act. Some scholars even suggest a backlash theory, suggesting that the positive relationship envisioned by critical mass theory may be mitigated by a backlash from male colleagues who feel their status threatening by the increased presence of women in the legislature (Kathlene 1994).

The results presented here were based partly on interviews that I conducted toward the end of 2002 in Bangkok with members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate in the Thai Parliament and with former politicians, representatives of women's NGOs, and academics at different universities. I would like to thank all interviewees for their willingness to share their views with me. They provided valuable insights into the legislative process and the actions of both female and male members of the Parliament.

LESSONS DRAWN FROM POST-INDUSTRIALIZED WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

Research from post-industrialized western democracies does in fact show a difference in policy priorities between the sexes. The experiences from the United States and Europe, especially the Nordic countries, also suggests that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to move from a low proportion of women parliamentarians to a high proportion without going through a phase in which gendered patterns in the content of politics appear (Wängnerud 2005).

As women have become more numerous in our legislative bodies, many scholars suggest directly or indirectly that the content of politics will change accordingly, affecting issue priorities and political
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agenda-setting and even the outcomes of legislative policy-making. The increased presence of women in the Swedish Parliament, for example, has altered the legislative environment and created a generally supportive cultural atmosphere conducive to the achievement of gender equality.

The number of women in politics is crucial in raising the gender-awareness of parliamentarians and the whole political elite. A critical minimum number of women seems to be a prerequisite to creating the necessary political will. It will be difficult to obtain the political will for gender equality if women are not fully involved in decision-making. The experience from the Nordic countries shows that once women enter the arena of parliament in much greater numbers, changes are more considerable and occur at a faster pace. The increased presence of women ensures that the various values, interests and life experiences of women are taken into account when decisions are made.

WOMEN’S WORK IN PARLIAMENT AND POLICY EMPHASIS

In order to study gender-based differences in the legislative priorities for women and men, I collected the data on the legislative agendas for female and male members of the House of Representatives in the Thai Parliament during several legislative sessions, starting with the Thai Rak Thai government led by Thaksin Shinawatra from 2001 to September 2003. In this section, I will examine the characteristics of those women serving in the Thai Parliament during this period, including the driving force behind their efforts to make politics a career, and this will be followed by an analysis of these women’s legislative behaviour.

Electoral Systems

What were the motives of female legislators for entering into the Thai Parliament? Can the motives of women legislators be attributed to the way in which politicians are elected? Before answering these questions, I will first explore and evaluate the extent to which the performance of the new electoral system, which was introduced under Thailand’s constitution, affected the recruitment of national
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legislators. In the women and politics literature, the features of an electoral system in a country is one of the most important factors affecting women’s representation in parliaments. The literature tends to support the contention that women have higher levels of representation in legislatures in countries with party list systems than in countries with single-member plurality electoral systems (Matland 2002; Rule 1994).

Thailand has undergone a significant political transformation as a result of widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the political system. This resulted in a new, democratic constitution in 1997. The ways in which people elect members of the national Parliament, an important condition for democracy, have changed dramatically. Before 1997, direct elections were held only for members of the House of Representatives, based upon the plurality system in small multi-member constituencies with multiple voting, in which voters were permitted to cast ballots for as many candidates as there were seats in a constituency (Nelson 2001: 289; Kokpol 2002: 279–80). In the pre-1997 electoral system, party labels were weak and in election campaigns the candidates tended to rely on their own vote-getting mechanisms rather than on parties. This was because in two and three seat constituencies this approach promoted contest, not only between competing parties but also between rival candidates from the same party. As a consequence, well-organized personal vote-getting networks of individual politicians served as the most important mechanism for mobilizing votes. This electoral system for the House of Representatives did not facilitate women’s representation.

Serious problems associated with past elections, including vote buying, corruption, and cheating, in combination with a desire to restructure the Thai political system through the electoral process led to the introduction of the new electoral system. According to the 1997 constitution in Thailand, voters elected members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each house had its own electoral system. The electoral system for the House of Representatives was a mix system of plurality and proportional systems whereby 400
members of the House of Representatives are to be elected on a single-member constituency basis and the remaining 100 elected on a party list basis forming a single nationwide constituency. The primary motive for introducing a single-member constituency was to make electoral districts smaller compared to the three-member districts of the past election. With smaller single-member constituencies the aim was to reduce the problems related to vote buying and vote canvassers since candidates are closer to the constituents and, therefore, more accountable to them (Kokpol 2002: 283–84).

There were certain requirements to be fulfilled by candidates wishing to stand for election to the House of Representatives: candidates must be at least 25 years old; candidates must have at least a bachelor’s degree or equivalent; and candidates must be members of any and only one political party for at least ninety days prior to the date of applying for candidacy in an election.

Unlike its predecessor, the Senate was to be elected in its entirety. The electoral reform under the new constitution provided for direct elections for the two hundred senatorial seats from seventy-six provinces. The new Senate has become more powerful than the previous one. In the past, Thai senators were political appointees and acted as rubber stamps for the government. The formal requirements for candidates to stand for election to the Senate differ from those for the House of Representatives. The 1997 Constitution specified differences in the qualifications of the members of the two houses. The lower age limit for Senate members was set at forty as opposed to that for the House of Representatives at 25. Like their colleagues running for the House of Representatives, candidates in an election for the Senate were required to hold at least a bachelor’s degree because it was expected that a high education requirement would improve the quality of the members in the Thai Parliament so as to be able to perform their legislative responsibility effectively. A further requirement that a candidate must not be a member of a political party was expected to create a politically impartial, non-partisan Senate. It was assumed that the age difference between the members of the two houses, when coupled with differences in the
nature of the electoral districts and with the non-partisan composition, would make it possible for the Senate to develop a distinctive character.

**Motivation for Entering Politics**
The women I interviewed were questioned about their motivation to enter into the national legislature, and all expressed a motivation for entering politics that could be more or less characterized as civic-oriented, a motivation which was coupled with a sense of public service (e.g., they wanted to help the constituency, society or country in general). Some interviewees also expressed an opportunity-based motivation (such as being encouraged to seek office, being recruited to run, wanted to enter politics, or had previous political experience). Spouse support appeared to be particularly important for the activation of women’s political careers. Some of them said that they received encouragement from their family circle, especially their husbands, to run for office. Upon a closer examination, women politicians in Thailand had more politically involved families than their male counterparts. Two conclusions may be drawn from the interviews. First, women legislators of both houses of Parliament pointed out that women in politics make more responsible choices than their male counterparts, guided by civic-oriented considerations, rather than career or other opportunity-oriented motives. Second, women senators put more emphasis on civic-oriented motivations than their female colleagues in the House of Representatives. This may reflect the expectations of the framers of the 1997 constitution to the effect that the Senate was to be politically impartial. It was expected that Senators would be non-partisan, experienced and, in a sense, above the battle. The Senate could act as a check on apparently ill-considered or partisan actions of the House of Representatives. Since the composition of the House would be wedded to the exigencies of party politics, it would change frequently. The Senate, with an independent and longer term of office (six-years) would create balance in the government and give stability to the operations of Parliament. The Senate was expected to play a stabilizing role in the event that
the House of Representatives was split on an issue along partisan lines. Another expectation of the Senate was that with its larger constituencies, it would represent the wider interests against the partisan and parochial local interests represented by the members of the House of Representatives. Those elected in these constituencies would need far more than purely local appeal.

The framers of the constitution hoped that the Senate would also provide for representation of elements unlike those who would be elected through the electoral system for the House of Representatives. They envisaged that there would be distinguished public figures, professionals and non-professionals of all kinds, representing a diversity of interests and points of view. In smaller electoral districts men and women of this calibre might not be elected, but a larger arena would mobilize their strength. The framers probably reasoned that many distinguished persons whom it would be desirable to have in the Senate might be reluctant to submit themselves to the demeaning requirements of party politics.

**Backgrounds**

Now we can look at the backgrounds of the members of the House of Representatives. Women came into office with a variety of experience and backgrounds. Women legislators were more likely to have lesser levels of occupational and political experience than men. As a whole, women House members overwhelmingly came from the middle and upper classes and, in many cases, belonged to prominent political families. Many of them became politically active by being exposed to politics through family life or by joining organizations. Although some of the women politicians were feminists and made efforts to advance women’s causes, many of them were virtually indistinguishable from their male colleagues in their background and policy agendas. As a group, the House members were distinguished by their very high levels of education, often at the graduate level, and their more prestigious occupational status. They are part of the socio-economic elite in Thai society. Indeed, women elected to Parliament in 2001 were younger and much better educated than
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their predecessors. Compared with those elected in the 1996 general elections, representatives with a master’s degree increased by nearly 24 per cent in the Senate, and rose from 17 to 41 per cent in the House of Representatives (Kokpol 2002: 304). Although the requirement of a bachelor’s degree was aimed at improving the quality of MPs in general, it resulted in excluding social groups with low levels of education. As a result, both male and female legislators were drawn disproportionately from the best educated groups in Thai society, but female parliamentarians were more likely than their male colleagues to come from advantaged backgrounds and prominent political families. The high educational profile of parliamentarians only served to reinforce elitism in national politics.

Most women had been active in their professions before becoming MPs and came from a more diverse set of careers than the women in the 1990s: they had been business women, professionals, local officeholders, or members of women’s organizations. Some women came from predominantly women’s occupations (such as teaching, nursing, social service, and volunteer work). In many cases women entered politics later in life than their male counterparts because women fulfilled responsibilities as wives and mothers before entering the political arena. Delaying the start of their political careers is one of the ways that some women in the Thai Parliament have used to avoid role conflicts between being homemakers and politicians. Female parliamentarians are not homogeneous. Their priorities, interests, backgrounds and preferences vary and some of them are not interested in gender issues at all.

A similar picture emerges when the backgrounds of senators are examined. As a result of the first senatorial election in Thailand, the newly elected senators had diverse backgrounds and experiences. Some senators had a background as activists or working in NGOs, which are new political force in Thai society. On the occupational front, women entering politics tended to have worked as a civic worker or community volunteer. Men, on the other hand, tended to have a professional background, usually in business or in the bureaucracy.

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The ability of women MPs to legislate on behalf of women is constrained by the fact that many of them were quite new to the arena of politics. After the 2001 House of Representatives election, there were more first-time members than ever before, with half of the elected members becoming members for the first time. The results of the election also show that there were more female than male newcomers. Thus, women are more handicapped than men where politics is considered. Many newly elected female MPs were not able to act effectively with regards to women’s issues due to their lack of expertise and lack of understanding of the rules and codes (both written and unwritten), procedures and mechanisms on how to get things done in the traditionally male dominant Parliament. For newly elected women parliamentarians to be effective in the legislative process, they must learn the rules of the game to promote women’s interests. While women are not at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men in terms of education, they are at a definite disadvantage in terms of political experiences. Although the majority of women MPs had been actively employed before becoming parliamentarians in different positions as local officeholders and members of women’s organizations and other NGOs, a sizable number of women members entered politics with little or no experience in politics at the national level.

Committee Assignments
As mentioned before, women are more likely than men to give legislative priority to women’s issues. Women are also more likely to be in positions to act on these issues because they are still more likely than men to serve on committees dealing with children, welfare, education, and other social services. In the legislative setting, assignments to committees and appointments to influential positions, such as female committee chairs, can have an important impact on legislation. Committee chairs have the power to set the legislative agenda and guide committee discussions. Access to relevant committees and key committee positions not only helps determine the success of women’s policy efforts, but can also affect the decision to pursue
those efforts in the first place. As Kanter (1977) argued, if there is a critical mass of women in committees, the effects of tokenism can be diminished.

In Thailand, as in many other countries, committee positions play an important role in the legislative policy-making process, since they determine which issues are placed on the legislative agenda, and so the appointment of more women to relevant committees may increase the openness of Parliament to women’s issue legislation. Previous research in western democracies found female legislators serving on committees dealing with traditional women’s issues. My working hypothesis was that there would be significant gender differences in the legislators’ committee assignments. It was anticipated that women would be overrepresented on committees concerned with traditional women’s issues (e.g., education, welfare, and culture) and men on prestigious committees (e.g., economic affairs, science and technology, and foreign or defence policy). As expected, women representatives were most heavily concentrated in a very narrow set of committee assignments (see Table 6.1). Women made up an overwhelming proportion (almost 65 per cent) of the House Committee on Children, Youth, Women and the Aged, which focuses on areas where women have traditionally borne disproportionate responsibility. Moreover, women constituted 29 per cent of the Committee on Tourism, 24 per cent of the Committee on Public Health, and 24 percent of the Social Welfare Committee. Thus, women clearly had a special interest in what are conventionally called women’s issues. Women are much less likely than men to sit on committees such as Communications and Telecommunications, Armed Forces, Economic Development, Monetary Affairs, Finance and Banking, and Transport. Other expected male and female emphases failed to emerge, however. Women representatives broadened their membership on committees and made their way to the more traditionally male-dominated committees, at least to a certain extent.

For example, almost 24 per cent of the members of the Science and Technology Committee and nearly 18 per cent of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the lower house were women. With this in
Table 6.1: Women MPs on House of Representatives standing committees (from 20 April 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee on:</th>
<th>Total women*</th>
<th>% women</th>
<th>Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Affairs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and Co-operatives</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>Assistant Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Armed Forces</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Administration Control</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>Spokeswoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, Youth, Women, Aged</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64.71</td>
<td>Chairwoman, Vice-Chairwoman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Spokeswoman, Assistant Spokeswoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications and Telecommunications</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Protection</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>Chairwoman, Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption Prevention and Suppression</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Development</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Assistant Secretary, Spokeswoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>Spokeswoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up of Implementation of Resolutions of the House of Representatives</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>Spokeswoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee on the Follow-up of Narcotics Prevention and Suppression</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>Spokeswoman, Member, Assistant Spokeswoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Representatives Affairs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee on</td>
<td>Total women*</td>
<td>% women</td>
<td>Positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice and Human Rights</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>Spokeswoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monetary Affairs, Finance, Banking and</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources and Environment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Affairs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>Assistant Spokeswoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion, Art and Culture</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Adviser, Assistant Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of the Minutes of Proceedings of the House</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Adviser, Assistant Spokeswoman, Assistant Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Welfare</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>Chairwoman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>Vice-Chairwoman, Spokeswoman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All committees have 17 members

Source: From the Thai Parliament.
mind, women were still proportionally over-represented in areas traditionally of interest to women. With the substantially increased presence of women in the future, the gender distribution will be more balanced. The picture of committee assignments was similar in the Senate.

It should be noted here that committee assignments in the Thai Parliament appear to be shaped by the characteristics of MPs in ways that reflect their interests and ties. It seems that women do not suffer from any outright discrimination in the assignment of committee slots. Committee assignments are more or less directly tied to the interests and expertise of individual members.

The chairperson of the committee is the focal point of committee activities and an important source of legislative power by way of controlling the agenda and the flow of discussion. The gender pattern in committee assignments was much more pronounced in the profile where women were committee chairpersons. In 2003, women held three standing committee chairs and nine vice chairs in the House of Representatives; Female chairs were concentrated on committees relating to ‘women’s issues’ such as children, women, consumer protection, and social welfare. Despite the increase in the number of women House members in the 2001 House election, the proportion of committee chairpersons who were women was much less than the proportion of legislators who were women. As for the Senate, the proportion of chairpersons who were female is the same as the proportion of female legislators. Only two women held a chair position – in the standing committees on Public Health and Labour and Social Welfare.

**WOMEN’S POLITICAL INFLUENCE**

One of the most frequently asked questions concerning the under-representation of women in public office in general is what difference it makes. Are women legislators in Thailand willing to take on women’s issues as legislative priorities contrary to critical mass theory? Given the patriarchal nature of Thai society, the country’s industrial transformation that has come only recently, and the small
number of women in its parliament, the patterns of legislative priorities between women and men should be different in Thailand than in Europe and North America. Most would expect that the small numbers of women and the male dominant political culture of the Thai Parliament to produce a hostile environment for such gendered advocacy. Since women tend to conform to the existing parameters when in a minority environment, they act the same way men do and so it is expected that issues of interest and importance to men and women in politics are fairly similar.

Do women members of the House of Representatives in the Thai Parliament legislate differently from their male colleagues, even if women have only token representation? In Thailand there is no systematic evidence to assess this question. In order to examine the impact of women in legislative offices, I examined bill introductions in the House of Representatives by gender. The bills were grouped into six categories by content area (children, education, environment, health care/public health, welfare/social security, and ‘other’). Information on bills was obtained from the office of the House of Representatives, which keeps records of all bills proposed and each bill’s fate. Illustrated below is a summary of the legislative product relating to women-related bills for three years in the House of Representatives. While the vast majority of legislation was introduced by male House members by virtue of their greater number, the overall number and proportion of bills introduced by women varies greatly from one subject area to another.

My study did not support the generalization that women legislators tend to place a higher priority than men on legislation relating to issues of traditional interest to women such as health care, public health and the environment. Yet I found that the results of this study support the contention that like women legislators in post-industrialized western democracies, women members of the Thai House of Representatives put a higher priority on children, welfare, social security and education than their male colleagues, even when they are only in a token position. Women have concentrated, far more than men, on these issues. However, this does not mean that women have
focused solely on these areas. Women have successfully advanced their priorities related to women, children and families. For example, women legislators have achieved passage of legislation in these areas at a greater rate than men.

In general there is a strong correlation between committee membership and the areas in which legislation was introduced and sponsored. As women comprised the majority of the Committee on Children, Youth, Women and the Aged, female legislators played an important role in introducing and successfully ushering in bills relating to children and welfare/social security through the legislative processes in an otherwise overwhelmingly male-dominated institution. Moreover, bills proposed by women in committee leadership positions such as chair and vice-chair were taken more seriously. As most of the female legislators had the experience of having children, those issues were very important to them. Unexpectedly, women did not make environmental issues a priority. These results show that women legislators in Thailand differ from female legislators in the United States and Europe, who tend to be more engaged than men in areas such as health care, public health and environment. Women have not advocated those issues in the Thai legislature.

Figure 6.1: Proportion of bills proposed and effective, according to gender
One plausible explanation for this difference on the issue of environment is that there was no woman represented on the Committee on Natural Resources and Environment. In the absence of female members, all the bills were introduced and ushered by male House members. Furthermore, women did not introduce any bills in the areas of health care/public health in spite of a sizable number of women serving on the Committee on Public Health (about 24 per cent). One possible explanation could be that women pursued different strategies for this type of issues. Female legislators may have viewed it as more effective to have their male colleagues introduce these bills.

Despite comprising only nine per cent of the members of the House of Representatives, women proposed nearly 35 per cent of the welfare and social security bills. While the corresponding percentages for the education bills were not as great as for the children and welfare/social security bills, they nevertheless reflect gender differences in the presentation of bills in this area, with women presenting 14 per cent of the education bills. These data provide support for

*Figure 6.2: Proportion of special category bills proposed and effective, according to gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Category</th>
<th>Male Proposed</th>
<th>Male Effective</th>
<th>Female Proposed</th>
<th>Female Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The special category refers to bills related to all other issues, such as businesses, finance, taxation, investment, transportation, funds, local administration, state enterprises, and political parties.

*Source: From the Thai Parliament.*
the assumption that female MPs attach a higher degree of priority to the areas of children, welfare/social security and education than do their male colleagues. No such significant gender differences were founded in the other areas considered to be of traditional interest to women.

In addition to the idea that women have a particular effect on the substance of politics, they are also thought to approach politics in different ways. In my interviews, several female parliamentarians emphasized women’s distinct approach to problem solving. They also emphasized women’s ability to cleanse the way in which politics is performed. Politics is seen implicitly as a sort of cess-pit of dishonesty in which male politicians do not shy away from bribery or corruption. Interview participants believed that women’s participation in the legislative process changed the nature of politics by bringing about positive changes in form, political behaviour, traditional attitudes, substance, processes and outcomes, yet only a few of them felt a responsibility to represent the interests and views of women. Most of the women I interviewed pointed out that women tend to conceptualize issues and policy problems more broadly and inclusively. A woman legislator told the author that women’s choices are often guided by substantial considerations rather than career motives as compared with their male colleagues. In general, female parliamentarians participating in the interviews expressed the belief that women contribute to the legislative process by arguing from different angles.

In sum, there are some distinct patterns. Allowing for several exceptions, women legislators in Thailand gave more attention to areas dealing with women’s, children’s and family issues. This is clearly reflected in the types of committees on which they sat, the chair positions they held, and the bills they introduced and pursued. Male legislators, on the other hand, were heavily overrepresented in business-related committees, more often held chair positions on such committees and introduced proportionally fewer bills dealing with women’s issues than women.

I conclude that even in the Thai context, where women constitute a small but distinct minority in the legislature, women can still make
a difference particularly when it comes to issues such as children, welfare, social security, and education. Of course, my study cannot establish a causal relationship between the proportion of women in parliament and legislative activity on behalf of women. A longitudinal study of legislative activities of both female and male legislators would be able to give more evidence concerning the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation in Thailand.

When asked about the extent to which the representation of women is perceived as part of the role of female legislators, some female parliamentarians felt that they faced conflicting expectations concerning their role. Some parliamentarians felt that they were serving a dual role in Parliament, representing their own constituencies and at the same time giving a voice to the concerns of women in general. The majority of women legislators I interviewed said they did not represent women specifically. They did not perceive that representing women should be part of their role as parliamentarians. Those few women MPs who saw themselves representing women’s interests were careful to designate broader and wider concerns.

Aside from the proportion of women in public office, what are the factors that are most likely to shape the desire and the ability of women to act for women? The extent to which women legislators can make a difference depends not only on the number of women in the Parliament but also on other factors. We shall now look briefly at such factors as motivation, women’s caucus, ties to women organizations, and party loyalty.

Party Discipline
When we assess women’s impact in politics, we should keep in mind the very powerful ways that political parties affect legislative behaviour on behalf of women’s interests. Women in the House of Representatives in Thailand toe to their party lines. Party discipline has limited women politicians’ freedom to speak and act on behalf of women’s interests. In interviews, several members of the House of Representatives stated that female legislators give in to the will of their party on most issues, including women’s issues, and that
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women can make a difference if they collaborate across party lines. Female MPs always find it difficult to get support from their female colleagues in other parties.

The fact that the senatorial election excluded the role of political parties should have given women senators more freedom to act for women’s issues. Women’s low representation in the Senate has, however, meant that women’s issues were considered a matter for women only and conceived as outside the mainstream of politics. As long as the proportion of women is low, there is a lack of interest of the political significance of gender. As women are a small minority in Parliament, men’s norms and interests set the tone of the parliamentary working environment. Accordingly, female legislators are expected to act in ways that fit into the norms created by their male colleagues. Due to the small number of women in the Senate, women have been unable to act for women and bring about successful outcomes in many important acts of legislation related to the politics of care, such as family policy, social policy and care of the elderly.

Several explanations arise as to why women legislators have not been able to introduce and prioritize issues important to women through the legislative process. One possibility is that they may find themselves pressured to conform and fit in to an overwhelmingly male-dominated institution. It is noteworthy that only one of the respondents to my interviews felt a sense of responsibility to represent women, but this can be understood in the context of concern about being pigeon-holed as exponents of women’s issues. There was a feeling that if they devoted themselves to women’s issues, women politicians could experience this as an obstacle in their political careers, by becoming closely associated with ‘soft’ issues with a low status. In contrast, some women parliamentarians I interviewed appeared not to be anxious in giving special attention to issues having an impact on the lives of women and on areas of traditional concern to women, such as children, welfare, and education. They said that their roles were no different from those of their male colleagues, however if some gender solidarity could be developed, the female legislators found this to be much better.
Women as Parliamentarians

Legislative Activity and Success

The mere introduction of bills does not tell us anything about whether legislators were successful in seeing those bills through the legislative process. Since women legislators in Thailand tend to have different legislative priorities from male legislators, the question to be asked is how successful women were in the passage of those bills dealing with women’s issues. Are ‘women’s issue bills’ introduced by women more successful than those sponsored by men in Thailand? The existing international literature reveals a mixed picture. Some studies of the state legislatures in the United States have found that passage of such bills is more likely when they are sponsored by women (Saint Germain 1989; Thomas 1994), while other studies find that the gender of the sponsor(s) has no significant effect on the likelihood of passage (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Bratton 2005). My study shows that female parliamentarians are at least as successful as their male colleagues in getting their bills passed with regard to certain issues such as children, welfare and social security. At the same time, there is no evidence to suggest that women’s presence in the House of Representatives had an effect on the adoption of bills relating to health care, public health or the environment. While still small, the proportion of women-related legislation enacted by women has increased as the number of women has increased over the years. All in all, information about bill introduction, bill passage and bill passage rates for bills in the area of women’s issues indicates that women were bringing some distinctive concerns to the legislative arena and were quite successful in passing their priorities.

Women Parliamentarians Club

Research tends to suggest that the extent to which female legislators can have a positive influence on the passage of bills related to women’s issues is a function of women’s capacity to organize collectively and reach a consensus across party lines on a specific agenda of women’s issues. Thomas (1994), for example, argues that women’s issue bills were more likely to pass in state legislatures that had a formal women’s caucus. Without such consensus, women’s efforts
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to act for women often floundered. According to some scholars, a feminist orientation among MPs is an important contributing factor to whether a formal women’s caucus is formed (Witt, Paget and Matthews 1994). It should be noted that the presence of a women’s caucus provides female legislators with additional resources beyond their numbers (Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994).

Female parliamentarians in many other countries have formed women’s legislative caucuses to unite them across party lines but female legislators in Thailand have not formed a women’s caucus. In the Thai context, women legislators come together more as an informal group than through a formal legislative caucus. In 1992, the Women Parliamentarians Club was formed, consisting of women members of the lower house and senators. It was intended as a forum for women legislators in both houses of the national legislature to meet together and provide encouragement and support for efforts that they make on behalf of women. Although it is the only formal space for women legislators, the club has not been very successful in forging unity. Few members participate on a regular basis in the club’s activities and in the absence of large numbers, women may not feel ready to form a formal women’s caucus. Coming from different backgrounds women legislators in the Thai political system have no strong sense of unity in the club. Their different backgrounds, interests, ideologies, and preferences have also made it rather difficult for them to form a united front on women’s issues. There is no feminist identity or sense of direction among Thai legislators and just twenty members make up the core of the club.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, Thai women parliamentarians tend to perceive themselves as more responsible in the choices they make, guided by civic-oriented considerations, rather than career or other opportunity-oriented motives. Women’s motives to enter politics vary and some are not interested in gender issues at all. Some women entering politics seemed to be motivated by a sense of public service. Many of them had politically influential families and were part of the socio-economic elite in Thai society.
Because women were a small minority in the Parliament, men’s norms and interests set the tone of the parliamentary working environment. In a male-dominated environment, it is not surprising that women legislators tend to adapt to the existing conditions and act more like their male colleagues. An important aspect in this context is the fact that the political parties affect women’s legislative behaviour in the House of Representatives in very powerful ways, and party discipline has limited women politicians’ freedom to speak and act to further women’s issues since they feel obligated to take the party line. The ability women MPs have to legislate on behalf of women is constrained by the fact that many of them were quite new to the arena of politics. More importantly, women’s ability to shape the legislative agenda has, to a great extent, been limited by their small numbers.

Similar to the findings in the literature on gender and politics, the concentration of women legislators in parliamentary committees can be found in traditional areas involving women’s issues and the majority of men in committees like finance, science, defence and foreign affairs. Women in Thailand have, however, broadened their membership on committees and forged their way into traditionally male-dominated committees to a certain extent. With a substantial increase of female representation, the gender distribution should be more balanced in the future.

Previous research on gender differences in legislator policy priorities in western democracies suggests that women’s presence in legislatures makes a difference. Women are more likely than men to give legislative priority to women’s issues and they are more likely to be in positions to act on such issues since the committees with a high proportion of females are those that deal with children, welfare, education, and other social services. Even in the Thai context, where women constitute a distinct minority in the legislature, women can and do make a difference when it comes to these issues. My study does not support the generalization that women legislators tend to place a higher priority than men on legislation relating to some issues of traditional interest to women such as health care, public...
health and environment. It is, however, my conclusion that Thai women in the House of Representatives prioritize children, welfare, social security and education more than men do, even when they are significantly under-represented, and that is in accordance with the pattern seen in western democracies.

Other features that distinguish women’s approach to legislation from men’s include their approach to problem solving. Women conceptualize issues and policy problems more broadly and inclusively. The women parliamentarians interviewed believed that women’s participation in the legislative process changed the nature of politics by bringing about changes in form, political behaviour and traditional attitudes, substance, process and outcomes. Only a few of them actually felt that it was their responsibility to forward women’s interests, and in fact quite a few stated that it was not their role as parliamentarians to do so.

REFERENCES


Women as Parliamentarians


Women and Politics in Thailand


Women as Parliamentarians


In an effort to understand the reasons for, and obstacles to, female representation in the Thai bureaucracy I have conducted a case study of women permanent civil servants (PCS) and their opportunities for advancement and participation in the public service of Thailand. Investigating these factors is crucial since legislation as well as many other influential efforts launched by NGOs and the UN to achieve gender equality have had limited success thus far (NCWA 2001). It is also very important for the Thai society as a whole. Women PCS make up a significant proportion of the Thai bureaucracy and have therefore been targeted in this study. Thai PCS are people of Thai nationality employed to administer programs and policies of non-military governmental agencies, except those elected to or appointed to political executive offices. A popular understanding of the term is that it refers to those who have been appointed to civil service positions in accordance with the Civil Service Act of 1992.

Since 1979 the Thai Government has ratified a large number of resolutions aimed at halting all forms of discrimination against women. Although most legislative hindrances have been removed,
minor laws and malignant social attitudes and values regarding gender roles remain. Previous research suggests that an effective strategy to eradicate these difficulties is increasing direct promotion and appointment of women leaders in government to other top positions, such as appointments to public boards, councils, committees and commissions, especially those concerning women’s issues and interests. PCS in decision-making positions have potential to create change, which is why it is important to understand what prevents women from reaching these positions.

To best understand the contemporary situation, the historic development of gender equality in Thailand will be addressed, along with a statistical investigation of female PCS that confirms women’s limited access to decision-making positions. On this basis I examine the professional areas in public service – courts and the judiciary, law enforcement, essential decision-making positions and the committee system – which are heavily criticized by the public for not promoting women’s participation in national development activities, to answer the following questions:

• Which underlying factors create gaps in status between male and female bureaucrats, especially in top positions?
• What are the critical obstacles to women’s advancement and representation?
• What can be done to decrease these gaps between the sexes?
• Will equal representation give more focus and interest to women’s issues?

My study has been based on several different kinds of sources, among them academic works on gender issues in Thailand, UN reports on gender development, Thai governmental sources and reports by NGOs, specifically Thailand’s Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI), as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As mentioned above, much legislative and non-governmental effort has been applied to advance women’s position in politics. To understand what
needs to be improved, one must first understand what has already been attempted and/or achieved.

**BACKGROUND**

The government’s National Economic and Social Development Plans have helped reinforce women’s issues in the long term development of economic and social governmental policies. Women’s problems finally became a focal point of policy drafters following the United Nation’s declaration of 1975 as the International Women’s Year, and 1975–1984 as the International Women’s Decade.

The *Fifth National Development Plan (1982–1986) on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men in Thailand* established that gender-based inequality could no longer be considered merely a neglected policy priority, but rather needed to be understood as an important dimension of all economic, social and structural policies in Thai Society. This approach was to be integrated into all political decision-making. Fundamental strategies of the national plan for development were the integration of women in the productive sector as well as the promotion of their advancement in society in general. The *Fifth National Development Plan* also directed special attention to the further enhancement of women leaders in the bureaucracy.

CEDAW, ratified in 1979, has been regarded as an important stepping stone for the Thai government toward an effective commitment to women’s affairs, with the government taking action to propose and ensure a set of laws against discrimination that limited women civil servants’ access to decision-making and effective participation.

The establishment of the National Commission on Women Affairs (NCWA) in the Prime Minister’s Office in 1989 has played an important role in advocating and promoting activities leading to the advancement and appointment of women to high positions in the Thai bureaucracy, as well as encouraging women to take charge of the women’s issues programs.

In 1990 the cabinet eventually sanctioned the withdrawal of the reservation in Article 11, paragraph 1(b) on employment rights in the Constitution, in accordance with the commitment to the
promulgation of CEDAW. In fact, all government agencies except those concerning national security were also ordered to review their discriminatory regulations on females occupying public positions. Two years later, Equal Opportunities for Access to All Government Jobs were completed as the remaining reservations were lifted (Pongsapich and Jamnarnwej 1998: 21).

From 1989 to 1991 many women’s activities were promoted and implemented, however most of the work was spread out in specific ministerial organizations and no ‘agents of change’ led to appointments of women to leadership positions in the administrative hierarchy. The national policy was to normalize women’s participation in important activities (NCWA 2001).

The Constitution and Gender Equality
From a legal point of view, most Thais – even the well educated – do not seem to believe that there is a need to constitutionalize women’s equal rights to men. None of Thailand’s 14 constitutions have included provisions specifically dealing with equality between men and women. Instead, the constitution grants equal rights to all citizens and the equal rights of women, therefore, seems to be taken for granted under this statement. In 1932, following the relatively smooth transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, women automatically acquired the right to vote and be elected. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Thai women were among the first in the world to obtain these rights without significant political action and the subsequent social unrest that took place in many leading democracies in the west.

The first constitution of 1932 understood female political leaders to be equal to men and granted the same voting and political rights. As the Thai people were granted their constitutional rights regardless of gender or religion, the equal rights of men and women were under the protection of His Majesty the King. As a result, men and women in the bureaucracy were employees of His Majesty’s government and had no need for specific gender equality regulations. To most Thai conservatives, the Royal Proclamation was perceived as national law.
The constitution of 1974 attempted a more gender-specific approach to equality, but unfortunately it only survived for two years. With the coup d'état in 1976, the ambitious work for women's rights in the fourth and fifth Development Plans died. Although the process was interrupted, it still provided important impetus for the awareness of women’s issues and boosted the gender-related campaigns around the drafting of the constitutions in the 1980s, leading up to the People's Constitution of 1997.

The constitutions drafted after 1974 attempted to define equality more precisely, however they also assumed that equality implied gender equality if not stated specifically elsewhere in the national laws. As a result the women’s groups had to lobby hard during the drafting of the 1995 constitution to reinforce the need for an explicit statement regarding equality between the sexes in the 1997 constitution. The inconsistencies between legal interpretation and practical implementation, however, still remained. The most obvious successes concerned social and political representation as well as advancement to executive and administrative positions. This is thoroughly elaborated below.

**International Agencies – the Real Spear-Head for Women’s Issues?**

Pressure on legislation to interpret equality along UN lines has been facilitated by the Thai membership of the UN and participation in the World Conferences on Women, and efforts made by the Thai NCWA. Indeed, progress has been made and most of the original reservations to the proposals put forward by CEDAW in 1979 were removed by the Cabinet in 1995.

Since 1998 continuous efforts have been made to expand the legal notion of equality, and the conceptual difference between the Thai definition and the CEDAW standard is now quite narrow. Presented below are important governmental actions designed to improve gender equality and especially equal rights for women to obtain governmental positions and to advance in the Thai bureaucracy (NCWA 2002: 3).

- Article 7 of the Constitution, *Equal Access to All Government Jobs*: This important issue was ratified by the National Assembly
Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

in 1995, alongside Article 10, which deals with equal education opportunities.

- Article 11 of the Constitution, Equal Employment Opportunities: On October 5, 1990, the government issued an important Executive Order (brought into law December 1990), demanding that all government agencies except those related to national security review their discriminatory regulations against female civil servants in high administrative positions.

- Article 15 of the Constitution, Legal Right to Sign Contracts: The government withdrew the reservation on women’s right to sign contracts and take on other authoritative assignments. By 1992 this led to the abandonment of the regulations in several ministries forbidding women PCS to be appointed to important posts.

The success in bringing Thailand so close to international standards laid out under CEDAW can largely be explained by the joint effort of women bureaucratic leaders and the NCW, alongside the active support of women’s groups, including the Women Lawyers’ Association of Thailand and the Friends of Women Foundation of Thailand. Much of their work consisted of lobbying the legislature and cabinet members, explaining the virtues of bringing Thailand into line with international standards. Finally the Council of Ministers agreed to withdraw the remaining reservations from 1979 (Pongsapich and Jamnarnwej 1998: 56).

This shows that there has been positive development regarding women’s legal right to participate and advance in politics, which paves the way for even further development of women’s issues. How much have women’s opportunities increased? Not enough, unfortunately, as only a few women have reached high governmental positions or high positions in the public bureaucracy. Women still have many rungs of the ladder to climb before achieving equal access to the civil service. The aim of this chapter is therefore to further explore the obstacles for the enhancement of female representation in the Thai bureaucracy.
General Provisions on Equal Rights following the Constitution of 1997

Frankly speaking, social values in Thailand must be considered the most important barrier for women trying to obtain equal rights. Looking at the constitution of 1997, the first ‘people’s constitution’, no provisions dealt explicitly with gender equality. Instead, according to the Constitutional Court, it embodies the principle of ‘equal treatment of all citizens’. The constitutional rights are thereby applicable to women as well as men. The constitution’s general Provision on Equal Rights stipulates as follows:

- **Chapter III Section 26:** Human dignity, rights and liberties of the people are to be protected. This article was definitely established to achieve equality between the sexes.

- **Section 28:** A person can expect human dignity or exercise his or her rights and liberties in so far as it is not in violation of the rights and liberties of other persons or contrary to this constitution or good morals.

- **Section 80:** All persons are equal before the law and shall be entitled to equal protection and promotion under the law. This is a unique contribution to the new constitution to specifically protect against discrimination or unfair practices on the basis of ‘difference in origin, race, language, sex, age, physical or health condition, personal status, economic or social standing, belief, education or political view’.

- **Section 77:** ‘The State shall […] prepare a development plan, moral and ethical standard of holders of political position government official and other employees of the state.’

Statements such as these indicate that the state can and must take active and effective measures to promote and advance women’s opportunities to obtain high decision-making positions as well as appointments to important committees.

Also, when scrutinizing the 39 sections of Chapter III of the constitution, ‘Rights and Liberties of the Thai People’, one can easily identify the important human right of being able to compete on
equal terms for advancement and promotion to important posts and positions. One might therefore conclude that the new constitution can be used to pave the way for improvement of women’s status in the near future if used intelligently, but just how intelligent does one need to be?

It would seem that the constitution contains secret intentions. In spite of 70 years of strenuous work by women’s groups, women CEOs still do not have the opportunities they are legally entitled to. At present, only a handful of Thai women who have served in the bureaucracy have been able to reach high positions in government. Less than ten per cent of all higher administrative positions in the ministerial organizations and class levels have been attained by payung keng (smart women). In science and technology oriented units such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Sciences, Technology and Public Welfare the pattern is even more visible.

In spite of all the efforts made to promote the legal status of women PCS, they are only able to reach as far as mid or high C levels of administration, and are sadly surpassed by men in their attempts to reach the very top of the ministerial hierarchy and positions such as Palad Kra-suang (Permanent Secretary General) or Athibodi (Director General). Quite obviously no sufficiently affirmative solution to the problem has been found yet. Political leaders and heads of scientific and technological groups need to work harder on finding ways to eradicate the factors that hinder women in high C level groups from be appointed to high ranking positions. Only as leaders, will women PCS be in the position of actually exercising and demonstrating their authority and ability in society.

STATISTICS ON PERMANENT CIVIL SERVANTS AND DEGREE OF PARTICIPATION

In general, Thai PCS are people of Thai nationality employed to administer programs and policies of non-military governmental agencies, except those elected to or appointed to political-executive offices. A popular understanding of the word is that it refers to those who have been appointed to civil-service positions in accordance with
the Civil Service Act of 1992, after a non-political examination of ability and security checks. This is sometimes popularly referred to as the merit system in public administration and is widely employed at central, provincial and local levels.

Examining perceptions of Thai bureaucracy, it seems that few people can identify the polity and official characteristic of the PCS (known as Kha-rachakarn Ponraruen) although these undoubtedly constitute the most potential source of puying keng. According to the current Civil Service Act, PCS are divided into two main groups, with twelve sub-divisions:

**Group 1: Central and Regional PCS**
- General Civil Servants
- Civil Servants in Government School
- Civil Servants in State University
- Prosecutorial Civil Servants
- Police Civil Servants

**Group 2: Provincial and Local PCS**
- Provincial PCS
- Tambon PCS
- Municipality PCS

---

**Table 7.1: Thai PCS, by gender and professional categories, fiscal year 2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>% Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General PCS</td>
<td>362,660</td>
<td>222,365</td>
<td>140,295</td>
<td>61.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS in Government School</td>
<td>452,029</td>
<td>271,800</td>
<td>180,229</td>
<td>60.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS in State University</td>
<td>54,717</td>
<td>34,621</td>
<td>20,096</td>
<td>63.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Assembly PCS</td>
<td>2,089</td>
<td>1,410</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>67.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional Independent PCS</td>
<td>10,307</td>
<td>7,749</td>
<td>2,558</td>
<td>75.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosecutor PCS</td>
<td>2,575</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>2,148</td>
<td>16.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS in Court of Justice</td>
<td>3,543</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>2,792</td>
<td>21.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police PCS</td>
<td>214,872</td>
<td>14,049</td>
<td>200,823</td>
<td>6.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok Metropolitan PCS</td>
<td>32,221</td>
<td>21,706</td>
<td>10,515</td>
<td>67.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial PCS</td>
<td>6,043</td>
<td>3,459</td>
<td>2,584</td>
<td>57.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tambon PCS</td>
<td>39,991</td>
<td>21,402</td>
<td>18,589</td>
<td>53.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality PCS</td>
<td>40,215</td>
<td>24,282</td>
<td>15,933</td>
<td>60.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,221,262</td>
<td>624,021</td>
<td>597,241</td>
<td>51.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women's Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

National Assembly Civil Servants
Constitutional Independent Agency Civil Servants
Justice Civil Servant
Civil Servant in the National Assembly

Group 2: Local Government PCS
Provincial Council Civil Servants
Tambon Council Civil Servants (sub-district)
Municipality Civil Servants
Bangkok Metropolitan PCS

Table 7.2: Male and female PCS by ministerial organization, fiscal year 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministerial Organization</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>% Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Office</td>
<td>6,623</td>
<td>3,681</td>
<td>2,942</td>
<td>55.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min. of Agric. and Cooperatives</td>
<td>36,340</td>
<td>13,515</td>
<td>22,825</td>
<td>37.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Commerce</td>
<td>3,870</td>
<td>2,513</td>
<td>1,357</td>
<td>64.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Culture</td>
<td>4,563</td>
<td>2,773</td>
<td>1,790</td>
<td>60.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td>509,028</td>
<td>308,699</td>
<td>200,329</td>
<td>60.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Energy</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>41.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Finance</td>
<td>31,148</td>
<td>20,680</td>
<td>10,468</td>
<td>66.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>1,580</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>57.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Industry</td>
<td>3,652</td>
<td>1,870</td>
<td>1,782</td>
<td>51.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Information and Communication Technology</td>
<td>1,976</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>48.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Interior</td>
<td>42,103</td>
<td>18,978</td>
<td>23,125</td>
<td>45.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
<td>16,554</td>
<td>5,263</td>
<td>11,291</td>
<td>31.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min. of Labour and Social Welfare</td>
<td>6,279</td>
<td>4,173</td>
<td>2,106</td>
<td>66.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment</td>
<td>10,725</td>
<td>2,371</td>
<td>8,354</td>
<td>22.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Public Health</td>
<td>167,568</td>
<td>129,851</td>
<td>37,717</td>
<td>77.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min. of Science and Technology</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>57.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Social Development and Human Security</td>
<td>3,556</td>
<td>2,266</td>
<td>1,290</td>
<td>63.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Tourism and Sports</td>
<td>1,823</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>1,025</td>
<td>43.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Transport</td>
<td>14,817</td>
<td>5,560</td>
<td>9,257</td>
<td>37.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>864,253</td>
<td>525,849</td>
<td>338,404</td>
<td>60.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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Commissioned PCS (C5–C11)

PCS can further be divided into classes, labelled with class position indicators from 1–11. PCS in group C1–C4 are those employed by the government agencies performing general clerical works, collectively regarded as non-commissioned civil servants. C5–C7 are normally employees with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Civil servants with a university education together with the C8–C11 group are considered commissioned employees. Administrative level PCS from C5 to C11 are the target groups for the study of this chapter. Tables 7.3 and 7.4 show examples of comparison by gender regarding PCS advancement in the general civil service. The difference in advancement between men and women PCS shows the gender-bias in Thailand’s civil service system.

The highest ranking levels, C8–C11, are considered administrative. The advancement and appointment of women to these levels are characterized by gender-bias and discrimination. Although the

Table 7.3: ‘General PCS’ members by gender and level of classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2000</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>1,881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5,444</td>
<td>8,615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>25,777</td>
<td>22,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>50,331</td>
<td>39,662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>56,195</td>
<td>41,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>44,873</td>
<td>25,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>26,546</td>
<td>13,523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>16,078</td>
<td>5,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2,208</td>
<td>1,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>228,161</td>
<td>159,893</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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total human civil service resource is about 58 per cent women, they hold less than 20 per cent of the top positions. The proportion of female PCS tends to decrease the higher the C level. Accordingly, men are disproportionately over-represented in the higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. Women are concentrated around lower C level jobs. What would the picture have been like if there were no gender-biases?

Have women PCS been successful when competing for the civil service jobs? As seen in the data above, some women have been fortunate enough to reach high C levels, while those who have become CEOs have remained few. Women do have some distinct concerns, preferences and interests due to their specific experiences and socialization, however looking at central governmental administration, fair possibilities for women’s advancement do not exist and women have been marginalized for nearly a century. For example, at present, only three women out of 20 hold the position of Palad Kra-suang.

Table 7.4: State University PCS by gender on classification levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2000</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>% women</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>53.82</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2,062</td>
<td>1,811</td>
<td>53.24</td>
<td>2,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>2,305</td>
<td>62.24</td>
<td>4,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3,445</td>
<td>2,577</td>
<td>57.21</td>
<td>3,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6,521</td>
<td>2,577</td>
<td>58.71</td>
<td>6,747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6,005</td>
<td>2,768</td>
<td>68.45</td>
<td>6,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6,938</td>
<td>2,732</td>
<td>71.75</td>
<td>6,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,877</td>
<td>1,306</td>
<td>68.78</td>
<td>2,216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>76.81</td>
<td>629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>86.97</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32,897</td>
<td>16,593</td>
<td>66.47</td>
<td>31,639</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.4 shows that women account for 86.9 per cent of PCS at C1 in the State University, and that the female employee rate decreases as the C level becomes higher while the number of male employees increases. The 1994 State University Bureau (SUB) Report indicated that there are six times as many female as male PCS at the C1 institutions for higher learning and four times as many at the C2 level.

In spite of great efforts and strenuous campaigns, rather than fading away, many laws and traditional social values that support male chauvinism have remained embedded in the textures of society, hindering an effective bureaucratic system. International efforts have acted as an important change agent to help correct the gender inequality problems in Thai public administration, especially since the 1995 Women’s Conference in Beijing. The Thai Government, responding affirmatively to the conference resolutions, decided to implement the Beijing Platform for Action in order to exhibit sincer-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCS Category</th>
<th>C Level</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>% women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Civil Servant PCS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>1,881</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Assembly PCS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional Independence PCS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Institute of Higher Learning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS (State University)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2,062</td>
<td>18,811</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok Metropolitan PCS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ity in its effort to promote female civil servants in high level decision-making positions as well as encouraging administrative employees to move towards the top of the hierarchy.

In order to better understand the target group of this study, I personally interviewed as many current top-ranking women in ministerial organizations as possible. They were found to be well-educated and had been active in public office for most of their professional lives. Judging by their surnames and kin relations in Thai society, all of them appeared to come from socially well-situated families. The majority had proactively pursued the issues of their current profession long before stepping up to their current prestigious status position.

When examining women’s motivations and conditions for advancement or appointment to important decision-making positions such as the committee system or membership of the Public Enterprise Board of Directors, we can discern a number of values and attitudes. Almost all women expressed gratitude over having the opportunity to use their talents and abilities to help Thailand and its people. Most of them acknowledged encouragement from a Puyai (senior supervisor), whom they had previously served and who had been the most important reason for their advancement. It was their hope that all puying keng (smart women) in the administrative hierarchy would find the same possibilities they had found.

Many successful PCS believe that women’s issues would be better represented if more women were appointed to the ministerial level. If men and women decision-makers raise different issues and bring different perspectives, it is imperative to appoint more capable women PCS to public office in order to promote women’s issues. Research conducted by the Sub-Committee on National Economic and Social Development on the Current Status of Thai Women indicated that women’s policy priorities differed only marginally from men’s policy priorities up until the 1970s, when for the first time women’s issues became a national concern in the drafting of the Third National Economic and Social Development Plan for 1972–1976 (NCWA 2001: Introduction).
Table 7.6: Women CEOs (C9–11) in selected ministerial organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Chief Executive</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.49</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and Cooperatives</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.32</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.23</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7.34</td>
<td>586</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

The 1975 declaration of the International Women’s Year in Mexico helped to identify women as a target group in need of special attention in development policies. Research in Thailand showed that high-ranking bureaucrats began to show interest in women’s issues in line with international trends. In particular, top women PCS in certain ministries dealing directly with women’s issues began to adapt new attitudes with respect to such areas as marriage and family laws, prostitution, domestic violence and employment opportunities.

A critical notion regarding the small number of women in policy-making is the public’s confidence that an increased presence of women would have a positive impact on public policy. If Thai bureaucracy had a larger number of female leaders, one would expect a more positive environment for women’s issues in an otherwise strongly male-dominated bureaucracy. Lingering, obsolete laws that are gender-biased still impede women’s participation in decision-making.

Participation in the Judicial System

A critical area for women’s issues is the judiciary. The Ministry of Justice has 16,554 permanent civil service employees, including general jurisdiction service staff. There are ten main departments in the Ministry of Justice: the Office of Permanent Secretary of Justice, the Department of Probation, the Department of Right and Equality Protection, the Department of Legal Execution, the Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection, the Department of Correction, the Department of Special Investigation, the Central Institute of Forensic Science, the Office of Justice Affairs and Office of the Narcotics Control Board (Ministry of Justice 2004).

There are three levels within the National Court of Justice System: First Instance, Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court. The Courts of First Instance include Civil Courts, Criminal courts, Provincial and Kwaeng courts, which are located in every province and handle the most serious criminal cases and major civil cases that occur within jurisdiction. The Court of Appeal is located within nine judicial regions, and handle appeals from the Courts of First Instance within their region. The Supreme Court is the final court of
appeal for all criminal and civil matters. It consists of a president and about 140 judges who alternate on the bench. The Cabinet appoints the judges on the recommendation of the Ministry of Justice.

In Thailand, the judicial PCS are specific professions and are appointed on a permanent tenure basis after a one year internship and a competitive exam. Those appointed as higher level judges usually come from the judicial benches. Promotions from the lower benches are decided by the executives and the Judicial Committee, with final approval from the Supreme Head of State (the monarch). If the judges have not committed any misdeeds they will serve until retirement, unless removed by His Majesty the King or by death (Section 251 of the Constitution).

Due to social gender values, there were no women judges in the Thai Court of Justice prior to 1998. There was no lack of suitable candidates since more women attended law school in the late 1980s than previously. A major obstacle for women is the gender-biased stereotype that women are emotional and unfit to make 'just' decisions. This unchallenged accusation excluded women from the judicial benches. The judicial power has been dominated by male values, thus disqualifying women from all judicial activities ever since the days of absolute monarchy.

During the first two decades of democracy, women’s movements worked for equal educational opportunities, entry into the professions and the abolition of the law that denied married women legal rights. In 1952 an important movement led by the Women’s Cultural Society of Thailand led the government to review the Civil and Commercial Code of Laws, aiming at the extension of justice to women. Finally, the traditional discrimination against appointing women as judges was stopped for good by the Ministry of Justice. At present, about 19 per cent of the 2,548 judges on the bench (at all levels) are women, but mostly at the regional and provincial levels (Ministry of Justice 2004).

A crucial factor barring women from acting as judges concerning disputes and violations of law and order stems from gender role socialization in the Thai culture. Democratic constitutionalism, how-
### Table 7.7 High-level judicial administrators by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Supreme Court</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dep. Pres. Supreme Court</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Judges Supreme Court</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dir.Gen. Court of Appeal</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dir.Gen. First Instance Court and Special Courts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ever, has more or less changed that picture. After lengthy debates on discrimination against female advancement in the judicial system, new sections in the Basic Laws have been introduced, concerning the court judiciary system and the appointment procedure to the Judicial Civil Service Committee.

As for the appointment of female judges in the higher courts, the results are quite promising. According to a CSC report (2005), the appointment of female judges has been increasing, although the number is still relatively small. In 2000 females accounted for 19.6 per cent of judges at all levels, compared to 18.9 per cent in 1998. Women also held 19.2 per cent of the positions in the judicial offices of the court system, including deputy judges, junior judges, legal aids, legal secretaries and legal experts (CSC 2005).

The changes in the pattern began in 1975, when the Ministry of Justice decided to abolish the regulations prohibiting women from becoming judges, government attorneys and prosecutors. This decision profoundly changed the status, progress and career development of women in the public sector. Most of the major ministerial agencies followed suit, and it became the case that about 25 per cent of female law graduates were employed by the civil service.

A brief examination of the judicial personnel system is enough to show that a reform of the courts and the judiciary system is necessary. The drafting of new laws following the 1997 constitution should have paid more attention to the rights of various groups including female jurists, however these expectations were not fulfilled. Even before the coup d’état of 2006 some negative attitudes to reform existed among male judges and prosecutors. Also, the amendment of many laws and regulations moved along at an unacceptable pace.

**Participation in Public Prosecution**

An important office in the judicial system that is not under direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice is the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), which is an independent unit under the Minister of Justice. As with the National Police and the court system, the OAG has been dominated by men for more than half a century. Women
Table 7.8: Judges at all levels by gender (FY 1998–2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>% Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>% Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court of First Instance</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>1.411</td>
<td></td>
<td>366</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>1.503</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court of Appeal</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>295</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>312</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women and Politics in Thailand

have only recently been allowed to enter the public investigation administration on equal terms.

The Prosecution Civil Service Personnel Act B.E. 2503 of 1960 stipulated openly that positions in the OAG and especially top judicial positions were not socially appropriate for the so-called weaker sex. The constitution of 1914 helped create awareness of women’s rights and the need for amendments of laws deeming women unfit for positions within prosecution. Through collaboration between the Faculty of Political Science and the Faculty of Law at Thammasat University and the Judicial Committee of the Justice Ministry, a need for legal reforms of the 1960 Prosecutor Personnel Act was recognized. There was consequently a need for reviews and amendments of the human resource management civil service laws and regulations on recruitment, hiring, career planning, appointment and opportunities for advancement and participation. The Prosecution Act of 1960 was abolished and replaced altogether in 1976. By the beginning of 1977 female attorneys could see changes in their opportunities to make a career in prosecution.

Table 7.9: OAG prosecution PCS administrative positions fiscal year 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position Rank in Prosecution</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>% women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attorney General</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Attorney General</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspector General</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division Director (Regional)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Division Director (Regional)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Prosecutor/Sp. Expert Prosec.</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Prosecutor</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Provincial Prosecutor</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Provincial Prosecutor</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Prosecutor</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Prosecutor</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,560</td>
<td>2,143</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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Women's Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

Table 7.10: Educational background of the prosecutors, FY 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>2,086</td>
<td>1,772</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,560</td>
<td>2,143</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to CSC records from 1998 to 2004 the number of female prosecutors in the Office of the Attorney General is still relatively small. In 1998, for example, the percentage of Women Public Prosecutors was as low as 12.1 per cent, leaving merely 417 prosecutors in all of Thailand to watch over women’s issues and problems.

Little data exists on the advancement of female prosecutors in administration in the judicial system of Thailand. A positive sign is the increase in promotions of female attorneys during 2004. Further, women have been able to forge careers in the OAG, ranging from Attorney General to the Senior Prosecutors, who act as Assistant Inspectors General of the Department.

According to the data above it seems that the opportunity for a career within the OAG depends on the qualifications of the female prosecutors as well as their will to pursue these positions. The under-representation of female prosecutors in administrative positions is however not necessarily due to discrimination, but rather an unwillingness to aim higher. An important factor deterring these women seems to be their educational background, as among the active female prosecutors at all levels and units, only 38.1 per cent possessed a post-graduate education, which is usually required for promotion. In a six year survey (1995 to 2000) of state graduate schools in Bangkok, it was reported that 94 of 214 students in the prosecutor graduate study program were women. A lack of self-confidence may be one reason why women’s aspirations to compete for higher positions in the administrative hierarchy are insufficient.
Participation in the Royal Thai Police Force

The Royal Thai Police is another organization heavily dominated by men, except in the administration and in some specialized professional groups such as lawyers, nurses, instructors and doctors. There are 2,766 commissioned female officers, amounting to 0.85 per cent of the total uniformed police force.

Almost all female uniformed police officers are to be found in the criminal and traffic departments, mostly in lower ranks. The largest groups of Police Women Commissioned Officers (PWCO) work in the Nursing Department of the Police General Hospital and the Office of the Surgeon General. The overall number of policewomen is small, and many come from other civic professions. In 1986 women were allowed into the police force as a result of the demands made by the NCWA and the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW). These two women’s organizations jointly proposed that there should be more women police officers in every police station to handle gender-sensitive cases, such as rape, divorce, domestic violence and sexual harassments.

Police women proved to be quite useful as they helped to improve the image of the police force in handling of gender-sensitive cases, as well as improving the security of female detainees. At present there are 158 local police stations in the Bangkok metropolitan area, each with four to five female police officers performing law enforcement duties and preventing unethical practices against female detainees.

When the program started, each police station was ordered to assign at least one PWCO to perform the general duties of inspector and investigator. A number of police stations were selected to participate in a pilot project, and after two successful years, the program was extended. More recently, the program has demonstrated a need for modification as only one or two women NCOs (Non Commissioned Offices) have remained at the stations, and surprisingly, only three stations in the Bangkok metropolitan area are still striving to make the program work. Only 77 provincial police stations have PWCOs dealing with cases relating to women.
Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

Table 7.11: Police Civil Servants by rank and gender, FY 2000–2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police General</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Lieut.-General</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Maj.-General</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Colonel (spec.)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Colonel</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Lieut.-Colonel</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>5,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Major</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>2,172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Lt.–Pol. Capt.</td>
<td>1,625</td>
<td>2,172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Snr. Sgt Major</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>18,102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Sergeant Major</td>
<td>1,041</td>
<td>42,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Sergeant</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>46,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Corporal</td>
<td>3,013</td>
<td>29,196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Lance-Corp.</td>
<td>1,759</td>
<td>38,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Constable</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>9,315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,884</td>
<td>210,763</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Office of the NCWA and the CSC conducted a national survey on women’s opportunities for advancement to positions of high rank in public administration. It indicated that female police officers are still discriminated against, not only by the CSC but also by the public in general. Almost all ranked and non-ranked female police officers were to be found in the lower job categories.

Joint efforts have been made by the Women Lawyers’ Association of Thailand, the Friends of Women Association, the Association for Civil Liberty of Thailand, and women leaders in government agencies to identify obstacles to equality and advancement of PWCOs. An investigation, a pilot project, in the Bangkok Metropolitan City indicates (among other things) that women commissioned officers do not prosper as well as male officers in the existing karn pitak santi-
Table 7.12: Police Civil Servants: commissioned ranks by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>% Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police General</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Lieut.-General</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Major-General</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Special) Pol. Colonel</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>0,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Colonel</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1,095</td>
<td>1,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Lieut.-Colonel</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>6,704</td>
<td>7,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Major</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1,497</td>
<td>3,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Lieut.-Captain</td>
<td>1,854</td>
<td>1,562</td>
<td>56,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,268</td>
<td>11,924</td>
<td>21,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

*rath* (the traditional police way) environment (Kanasutra et al. 1976: 22–23). The results of the study will be of great use in future works for equality.

**PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM**

Introducing more female leaders in the Thai administration has been a problem since the first constitution in 1932. Although the public administration was able to eradicate many of the unconstructive traditional practices and legislative procedures during its first three decades, many unwritten laws still prevent women from participating fully in the public committees, commissions and public boards designed to implement and monitor the development programs and policies brought forth by the Civil Service Administration.

The National Council of Women of Thailand (NCWT) conducted a survey in 2001, concerning the gender composition of national committees. Through a questionnaire sent to 322 committee members, NCWT discovered that of a total of 6,338 committee members, 15.9 per cent were women. Almost 20 per cent of the committees (63) had no women members at all. The study also noted that the committees dealing with law and regulations – such as the Office of Attorney General, the Royal Police Department and the Ministry of the Interior – had a tendency to limit the number of females on the committees. On several committees there were no women at all. As a result of the findings of the investigation, five of the major committees which did not have women representatives were ordered to include women and these committees were later reported to have a more efficient decision-making process.

The Ministry of Justice has a total of 16 external councils, boards and committees to attend to women’s and children’s issues. Only seven of these demonstrated the gender balance intended. Three of the 16 councils had no women members at all and women only constituted about 30 per cent of the total amount of the members. A better balance between the sexes was only found in the committees devoted to issues of a more general character, in which women are explicitly chosen to participate.
Some ministries have tried to increase the presence of women by refusing to appoint any members from those agencies which have not nominated an equal number of women and men. Other ministers from the Prachatipat (the Democrat Party) cabinet attempted to address the problem by shortening the periods of employment in order to put pressure on the organizations to create a better gender balance.

Another channel for the promotion of women’s participation is through NGOs. Section 45 of the 1997 constitution guaranteed the right to join and form associations, and the specific NGO environment in Thailand is envied by many other nations. Many NGO committee members come from government committees, commissions and even Executive Boards of Public Enterprise, and many are women. Female PCS serving on the NGO committees do tremendously important work by placing public issues on the government’s agenda as well as advising NGOs on how to act according to government goals. Women thereby work as important change agents by creating understanding between the government and the public.

Obviously, the equal participation of women and men at all levels of decision-making has not been achieved, even though the number of women PCSs has increased in both central and local administration. The reasons for the absence of women on the national committees are many. Among the most important are low self-esteem among women, the predominance of traditional gender values in organizational culture and gender-bias among the male-dominated gatekeepers of the organizations.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HINDRANCES
The Thai civil service has long been famous for its openness toward women. At the time of the UN Nairobi Conference on women in 1985, the International Labour Organization (ILO) special report noted that women constituted an amazing 50.2 per cent of all employees in the Thai governmental sector – a record for Asia at that time. Although that might seem surprising, women PCS were estimated to make up 49.2 per cent of the Thai public sector in
Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

2003, and CSC’s latest figures show 48.5 per cent, even though the government implemented a policy of early retirement and a program of government administrative reform.

Numbers alone do not ensure effective women’s representation in national development programs. Is spite of women being well educated and possessing considerable social skills, the important top decision-making positions remain male-dominated. In spite of joint efforts by international organizations and national legal groups, women hold less than ten per cent of ministerial positions.

Traditional values are often seen as a major obstacle to women’s participation in society, especially in high positions. From a very young age, Thai girls and boys are socialized into their different roles in society. Girls and women are taught to ‘love the house and watch the home,’ and they are taught that they have natural characteristics not suitable for the ‘battling and applauding’ of government and public administrative leadership. This prevailing biased understanding of Thai womanhood influences the women who are given the opportunity to run for public office. The prevailing perception of male superiority seems to be an important obstacle for women in exercising their right to participate and advance to higher positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Family obligations and the idea of male superiority have obstructed women’s advancement opportunities in public administration. Many courageous women candidates lose elected positions to men perhaps, because of biased committee gatekeepers. Other cultural preconceptions affect the expectations on the female bureaucrats. The public seems to have mixed expectations of women: on the one hand they are not considered to be qualified for high positions, while on the other hand they are expected to have a stricter sense of morality. As a result, women competing for administrative positions, or those already employed in the public sector, have less room for mistakes and are judged more severely if they fail to act according to moral standards. The more successful a woman is, the more scrutinized she will be in comparison with her male colleagues.
Women’s Education
In order to fully understand the problem of women’s positions and advancement in the bureaucratic system it is crucial to look at education. In the past, education was open to women only as far as social traditions allowed. After women obtained the right to vote in 1932, Chulalongkorn University allowed women to participate in all available courses and subjects. In 1934, Thammasat University followed Chulalongkorn’s example by introducing higher studies for women in important areas such as jurisprudence and government. In the following years, hundreds of private and government institutions contributed to the increased educational opportunities for women. Most Thai governments have also introduced scholarships for women in order to attract them to higher studies, as education is considered the best way to foster and recruit talented women to public service.

Another important factor behind the small numbers of female bureaucrats in high ministerial positions is the lack of an eligible pool of female candidates within the organization. There are high demands on women bureaucrats, and high qualifications are required when selecting women to important or newly created positions. They need both formal and informal networks of various kinds. Lack of these and strong in-group cohesion that excludes new members reduce women’s chances of advancement in the administrative hierarchy.

With the advent of the National Economic and Social Plan, the UN declaration of 1975 as International Women’s Year and 1975–1984 as International Women’s Decade, government development planners became more concerned with women’s issues, and more specifically their legal rights to participate in national development policies and programs.

The drafting of the Fifth National Development Plan (1982–1986) coincided with an unusually high record of crimes related to ‘women’s issues’ such as sexual harassment, child labour, rape and domestic violence. The governmental planners concluded that there existed a need for women’s expertise in the implementation of national development programs.
Women's Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

The Ministry of the Interior and the Foreign Affairs Office expressed a need to recruit women with a background in political science and public administration, while other, more technically oriented government ministries, such as the Ministry of Science, Technology and Energy, the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Environment also tried to include more women in their organizations.

In order to increase the number of women, the government introduced a number of scholarships especially designed for women studying science and technology. An evaluation of these efforts revealed, however, that women tended to shy away from the engineering and agricultural fields of the public sector.

Assessment of Women's Equal Rights and Opportunities for Advancement

As mentioned earlier, women still have a long way to go before achieving true equality. The constitution of 1974 was an attempt to emphasize equality between men and women. As a result, women became more aware of their legal rights and things began to change. Although changes have come slowly, Thailand still seems to be moving forward, and for example discriminatory laws and regulations have been amended, reformed or scrapped altogether. Gender discrimination persists, however. The introduction of democratic institutions and removal of legal obstacles have not been enough to ensure women's equal professional opportunities.

The findings in this chapter have nonetheless shown that the number of women in high administrative positions (C 9–11) has increased, in part because of family status and connections but also, more importantly, because of personal qualities and leadership abilities. There are also many women who have been shunned or have left the civil service in spite of possessing leadership abilities and professional qualities. Women in high-ranking government positions are particularly prone to advance more slowly than their male counterparts. Society is thus left with fewer female leaders, and female bureaucrats in high-ranking positions with less professional experience, which reduces their ability to advance. Altogether, women only held 14.03 per cent of all top administrative positions in 2004. It is
also noteworthy that discrimination is particularly evident in certain ministries, such as the Ministry of Justice, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Science and Technology. For all the women aiming for high positions, and particularly in these fields, it takes more time and more work than men put in to prove their ability not only in their own professional environment, but to society at large.

As gender equality is written into legal documents, the public administrations that are supposed to implement them need to be informed about how to realize those laws. If this does not occur, many current and future laws will be ineffective. Elements of gender discrimination are intricately inter-linked and must therefore be addressed as a whole. Isolating the specific parts will fail to solve gender discrimination. Leaving out one part will undermine the whole process. For example, a female candidate who applies for a position on equal terms would not be able to advance if equality does not exist throughout the system.

Legislators in the National Assembly and most people at the forefront of women’s groups believe that Thailand needs a consistent and coherent legal statement of equal rights for both sexes. Those rights must then be upheld by the system of courts and enabled by the public and private sectors. It is argued that such a law could easily have been attained in the People’s Constitution of 1997. The provisions concerning equal rights and freedom of the people, as specified in Article 26 to Article 45 in the constitution are obviously aimed at correcting all possible forms of discrimination. What Thailand needs is a sincere reinterpretation and application of this in legislation. If equality between the sexes were to be transformed into concrete laws involving all parts of society, laws against discrimination could be advocated more effectively, and with the support of effective legislation, women would consequently be encouraged to participate in projects and programs for development. Civil society as a whole would further be improved through social and political reforms.

Gender equality would not benefit from the creation of a dual system regarding each party’s rights and responsibilities, which would
risk cementing their differences. Experience has shown that double standards or dual systems automatically result in one group dominating over the other. If women’s rights are defined as separate from those of men, the male-dominated society will immediately react by designating women’s status as inferior.

Although the constitutional Equal Rights Provision is a useful way of achieving equality it cannot guarantee it. It can only serve as a tool or an effective approach if it is used intelligently. The rest of the work must be done by proactive women PCS in every sector of public bureaucracy and public management. Women in decision-making positions have the power of enforcement and these women are particularly well placed to influence policy and legislation.

**THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN PCS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

To the Thai people, good governance means the exercise of authority by managing and directing the affairs of the national community in the best interest of the people. With this in mind, the actions of high-ranking administrators affect every aspect of the lives of the citizens. Even issues like to whom and when we marry, and whether we may or may not use our names are affected by the interpretation and enforcement of laws and public policies. As such, women’s legal status and women’s issues are so underdeveloped that it is difficult to comprehend their extent. In the NCWA Plan of Action for 2002-2006 (NCWA 2001, part II), several important areas for women’s rights and equality were identified:

- Equal opportunity and access to employment and advancement in government.
- Equal employment opportunities.
- Equality in family life and marriage.
- Married women’s personal rights.
- Right to nullify engagement without consent.
- Right to education and training.
As far as public authority is concerned, female PCS have done very little in the above mentioned areas. It may be safe to say that the women PCS have not used their power to further equality, for example not working to improve women’s issues. Perhaps they have not felt that these are the issues their families have expected them to promote, or they have not felt that these kinds of issues would enable them to advance in the hierarchy. In any case, it is safe to assume that women PCS as a group have not been any more successful today than 50 or 70 years ago when it comes to representing women’s issues adequately.

Several reasons exist as to why women have participated to such a low extent in public service programs and decision-making. Many laws still contradict the constitution, allowing gender stereotypes to influence and reinforce inequality in the realms of power, prestige, authority and wealth. Negative perceptions of women in relation to authority, power and wealth still exist. Women and child-rearing are still predominantly viewed as a harmonious pairing. Society at large quietly and continuously demonstrates an unwillingness to allow women to occupy the top positions, and women move forward slowly in the administrative system, gaining fewer senior and decision-making positions. The behaviour reproduces itself in an endless circle. All these elements complicate the situation, making it more difficult to deal with.

The history of Thai’s women’s movements is also important to consider. Thai women have only been able to identify themselves as a unified group in political movements and social processes to a limited extent. Added to that, male domination and an unwillingness among the public to deal with discrimination and gender-biases have allowed negative stereotypes to reproduce in peace, hindering women from fully participating in politics.

Last but not least, the Asian Development Bank (ADB 1998) report on gender and development suggested that women working in the administrative organizations specifically dealing with women’s issues give an important impetus to awareness of women’s issues in civil society demonstrated by female PCS. The ADB promulgates
Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

the idea of personal responsibility to underline how important and serious women’s problems are. An effective approach may be that female PCS leaders taking part in the following strategies:

• Women PCS in all governmental agencies need to be supported and encouraged to determine the appropriate means to deal with women’s issues and interests at all levels.

• There should be equal determination of the political agenda as well as execution of decisions.

• There must be no difference in terms of expectations of males and females, and women must be recognized for their performance and given the opportunity to advance accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Elements of Thai society that create gaps between men and women are foggy but some fundamental gaps that can be identified are women’s distinct concerns, preferences and interests due to their specific experiences and socialization. Since they are under-represented in politics these are issues that are overlooked. Embedded textures of society and unwritten laws remain and hinder the development of an effective democracy. Negative associations of women with authority, power and wealth still exist in the Thai society. Women usually have less professional experience, reducing their chances for advancement. High-ranking positions have been difficult for women to reach partly because of the lack of an eligibility pool, and partly because reaching such positions requires both formal and informal networks of various kinds, which points to the strong in-group (elitist) cohesion in Thai political society. Women from all classes need to be represented if there is to be true democracy. All of these factors result in a vicious circle.

Several crucial obstacles to women’s equality can be identified. Judges in the Thai judicial system, for example, serve until retirement if they do not commit any misdeeds. This could present an obstacle since the circulation of people in these positions is very slow and it will therefore take time before women have equal representa-
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tion, although when women do have equal representation they will also have more freedom to act. The gender-biased stereotype that women are emotional and unfit to make ‘just’ decisions presents yet another barrier.

Women’s absence in politics is largely due to low self-esteem, the predominance of gender values in the organization culture and gender-bias among the male dominated gatekeepers of the system. Traditional values are major obstacles to women’s representation and absence in high-ranking positions. Thai boys and girls are socialized into their different roles in society. Women are taught to love the home environment and that they are not built for the scheming and strategic thinking involved in politics. The perception of male superiority and women’s obligation to the family prevail. Perhaps the most essential obstacle to women in the Thai bureaucracy is that they are expected to have higher moral standards than men and they are judged more severely when they make mistakes and so they cannot afford to fail.

Even though much remains to be done it is evident that international organizations have had great influence on Thai politics, whether that has been due to the Thai government’s genuine commitment to the cause or a desire to save face. A conference in Mexico in 1975, resulting in the proclamation of the Women’s Year, helped identify women as a target group in need of special attention in development polices. Influenced by the international trend, high-ranking bureaucrats in Thailand began to show interest in women’s issues. In affirmative response to the conference resolutions, The Thai government decided to implement the Beijing Platform for Action in order to exhibit sincerity in its efforts to promote female civil servants to high level decision-making positions, and to encourage administrative employees to move forward. These examples show that the findings and pressures international forums exert on governments can and do have an effect.

It is important to increase public confidence in women’s abilities. One way to do that would be to ensure women’s equal educational opportunities. Education is considered the best way to foster and
Women’s Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy

recruit talented women to the public service and most Thai governments have introduced scholarships to attract women to higher studies. With the constitution of 1974, which emphasized gender equality, women became more aware of their legal rights and things began to change. Creating awareness is thus essential to women’s equality.

Democratic institutions and the removal of legal obstacles have not been enough to ensure women’s equal representation. It is not sufficient just to write laws without any plan of how to implement them. Politicians in the Thai bureaucracy also need to take personal responsibility for the improvement of women's situation because representatives of a democracy should be held accountable for the policies they uphold.

Many people assume that once critical mass is achieved, there will be a distinctly increased focus on women’s issues. Until the 1970s women's policy priorities only marginally differed from men's policy priorities. Female PCS have done very little to bring improvement to areas crucial to women’s rights and equality, which may depend on lack of support from their families. Further, forwarding women’s issues may not enable them to advance in their career. So far, considering that women still present a minority in the bureaucracy, there is no answer to whether women will give more focus on women's issues once they gain equal representation. Thai women have only been able to identify themselves as a unified group in political movements and social processes to a limited extent. If women become decision-makers, and if they are aware of their contribution to the improvement of women's status, the conditions for women will surely improve.

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Although there has been an increasing awareness among educated Thai women that there is a lack of gender equality, feminism as a social movement has not attracted many followers in Thailand. A large number of women seem to be content with their prescribed social roles as housekeepers, wives, mothers and so on. Nurses, secretaries and school teachers have been popular occupations among those women who have preferred to pursue a career outside the family sphere.

What happens in Thailand is not an exception; it merely reflects a universal trend. Studies in the west have found that traditional views of gender roles still persist. Sex role development has recently become the topic commanding more attention and creating more controversy. Teachers, parents, as well as researchers have attempted to understand how individuals develop their male and female roles (Flake-Hobson, Skeen and Robinson 1980:155-162).

Feminism as a concept and a social movement may also pose an obstacle to the study of women in social and political environments since no unified view of feminism exists (Delmar 1986: 9). There are at least as many as five perspectives, namely liberal feminism,
Marxist feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, and socialist feminism (Songsamphan 2004: 502–505). Some western graduate schools that offer courses on feminism even assume that feminism is over, and conclude that we have entered a post-feminist era.

This research paper is not a study of feminism per se, although it uses feminist theory as a starting point for discussion. The main concerns of our study are to identify and analyze those factors that connect Thai middle class women to political participation. In the socio-economic field, Thai middle class women are now almost on a par with men. They are as highly educated and economically self-sufficient as Thai men, and for those who are married, many work to support their families economically, as do their husbands. Organizationally, these working women have the potential to be promoted to the executive ranks, a privilege already enjoyed by a handful of women. Looking at politics, there are now quite a few Thai women serving as senators, members of parliament and cabinet members, but there are also initiatives to recruit more talented women to serve in local and national political positions. As the middle class is becoming more self-sufficient and competent and thereby also socially and politically independent, Thai middle class women are not as likely to be trapped in patron-client networks created by local or national elites. The inclusion of these women is thus important as well as profoundly meaningful for Thai politics, and it needs further research.

Women’s participation in politics is also interesting because it is concerned with the concept of citizenship, which is one of the major concepts in political science. Some scholars argue that citizenship is still a contested concept, although the difficulty of arriving at a comprehensive definition has been discussed since the days of Greek civilization. According to Aristotle, it implies a complex moral and ethical relationship between the individual, the state and society. Citizenship later became a status bestowed upon those who were considered full members of the state and entailed rights as well as duties (Lister 1997), highlighting the important fact that women were not traditionally granted full citizenship.
## Table 8.1: Members of Parliament (1933–1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Female by-election</th>
<th>Male election</th>
<th>Male by-election</th>
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<td>120</td>
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THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Under the reign of King Rama VII in 1932, Thai women were entitled to vote for the first time, following the administrative change from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. They were also given equal rights to nominate themselves for the general election. The first election was indirect and was held only a year after the absolute monarchy had been overthrown, and in this election voters in each province chose a representative of a sub-district (tambon) who then voted for a member of the House of Representatives for that province (Siam Almanac 1990: 466). Despite the opportunity to enter the political arena as guaranteed by the first election, it was a long time before women came to hold political positions. It took 17 years and 14 elections before Thailand’s first female candidate, Mrs. Orapin Chaiyakarn of the Ubolrajathani province in the Northeast of Thailand, was finally elected in 1949 (Thomson and Bhongsvej 1995a: 7; Decharin 1982: 16–17). Since then women have been increasingly interested in participating in elections and the number of women who have been elected has risen constantly from four in 1952 to nine in 1979, 13 in 1983, 15 in 1992 and finally 24 in 1995.

It was in the election of March 1992 that gender-related statistics on voters were recorded for the first time in Thai history (Thomson 1995: 8). As shown in Table 8.2, the percentage of eligible female voters was slightly higher than that of men, about 50.6 per cent compared to 49.4. Among the eligible voters, women (50.8 per cent) decided to participate in the election to a larger extent than men (49.2 per cent). In Bangkok alone, 51.6 per cent of the eligible voters were women as compared to 48.40 per cent of the eligible male voters.

An exit poll was conducted by the Gender Research and Development Institute in collaboration with three local newspapers in the Election of December 1992 in order to predict which female candidates would be elected and to which party they would belong. About the same number of men and women participated in the study. However, more women than men had given the right prediction (Thomson,
Political Participation of Thai Middle-Class Women

The author thus concluded that Thai women were more knowledgeable in politics than men.

THE NEW CONSTITUTION

On 9 November 2000, the Chuan Leekpai Government announced the dissolution of the House of Representatives with the approval from His Majesty the King. The new general election date was set to 6 January 2001, sixty days after the dissolution. The main reason for the dissolution as stated by the Government was the severe deterioration of the socio-political and economic conditions over the past years. The government set the new and first people's Constitution into motion in 2000, which was an urgent effort to draft laws that would bring the various sections of the Constitution into effect.

The new Constitution brought changes to many aspects of the Thai electoral system. As stated in the Constitution, all 500 members of the House of Representatives are elected in two types of constituencies: 100 are elected from party lists; the remaining 400 are elected from single member constituencies.

Moreover, the new constitution set up a new and neutral political body – the Election Commission (EC) – to take sole responsibility for monitoring the Thai elections. According to the Organic Law

Table 8.2: Voters in the national elections (22 March 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Male voters</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>No. (mil.)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No. (mil.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eligible voters</td>
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<td>50.6</td>
<td>16.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual voters</td>
<td>9.769</td>
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<td>9.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible voters</td>
<td>1.724</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>1.618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual voters</td>
<td>0.720</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>0.702</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women and Politics in Thailand

on the Election Commission Chapter One, Section ten, the EC was given the power and the obligation to conduct the national elections instead of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. For the first time in history, the Ministry of Interior Affairs no longer took any part in the elections at any levels and has not done so since. The duties of the EC included organizing the elections for the House of Representatives, the Senate and local elections. The EC also organizes referendums, regulates and supports all political parties, provide political education and research, facilitates signature collections to submit bills, as well as organize local impeachment votes.

The General Election 2001

The EC’s first nationwide election did not go as smoothly as planned. Despite the existence of Organic Laws, such irregularities as illegal funds, violations of campaign regulations and vote-buying attempts presented the EC with a number of obstacles. Many candidates also found the rules and guidelines too rigid. Evidence of vote-buying

Table 8.3: The 2001 general election results of the House of the Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political parties</th>
<th>No. of MP’s from single-member constituencies</th>
<th>No. of MP’s from proportional representation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thai Rak Thai</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charttai</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Aspiration*</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart Pattana</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seritham*</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rassadorn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Motherland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Action</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The New Aspiration and Seritham Parties were later merged into Thai Rak Thai Party.
attempts and other kinds of violations were prevalent in most provinces. As reported by the Maha Sarakham Election Commission, the following examples of the violations were noted:

- Per diem payments to party members attending meetings
- Free sightseeing trips for vote canvassers
- Handout funds to villages
- Gifts to potential voters such as wristwatches, spectacles, relief supplies, and coffins (The Election Commission Report on the General Election 2001)

The results of the 2001 General Elections were remarkable. Of the 42,789,001 eligible voters, approximately 69.95 per cent voted. As is seen in Table 8.3 the single-member constituencies or first-past-the-post systems clearly benefited the big political parties, especially Thai Rak Thai party and the Democrat Party.

Considering the number of female representatives from both electoral systems, Thai women had made a big leap in the elections. As is statistically shown, the number of women who were elected Members of Parliament increased from 24 in 1995 (Table 8.1) to 38 in the 2001 elections (Table 8.4).

We had expected that with the help of the highly trained personnel and high-speed technologies, all statistical data on the national election in 2000 would be systematically and comprehensively gathered and sorted. To our dismay, the election results were not reported by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral system</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportional representation</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-member constituencies</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sex. Therefore, as a result of the unfortunate unavailability of gender-
segregated data on political participation in the election, it has not
been possible to report on these findings. However, in order to inves-
tigate the political behaviour of Thai women in the 2000 elections, we
conducted field surveys in the Bangkok area. The details and results of
the study are thoroughly discussed and presented below.

A LITERARY SURVEY

Feminism is not a new phenomenon in Thailand; the concept of
feminism – particularly liberal feminism – was introduced to the
country some time ago, and has been adopted regardless of the
contextual difference between Thailand and the West. Thai women
have been described as modernized, independent, self-reliant, work-
ing women, yet mistreated by men. However, Thai women are not
homogeneous; women of different social classes and sub-cultures
face different problems. In order to understand Thai women's situa-
tion, it is important to consider the multi-dimensional complexity of
their living conditions (Songsamphan 2004:505–518).

Feminist studies in Thailand have followed two traditions.
First, women are described as different from, but equal to men.
This description is supported by the data and experiences of some
women, especially those belonging to the high and middle strata of
the society. It claims that traditionally Thai women have used one
hand fighting against their enemies along with their husbands, while
using the other hand to raise their children. Thai women are said
to have benefited from the reforms during the reigns of King Rama
IV and King Rama V, when opportunities opened up for them to
acquire higher education and thereby becoming economically inde-
pendent, as well as good wives and modern mothers. As for politics,
Thai women did not have to fight for their right to vote, since uni-
versal suffrage was adopted as soon as the country became democ-
ocratic. Instead of gaining political power through the mobilization
of women and thereby producing a strong and independent women’s
movement, women have influenced politics from behind the scene.
A common story told in many quarters of the society is that even
the army commander himself concedes to have to report to the real commander at home. A popular episode in many television shows is the muscular husband who shows fear to nobody except his wife. When these sorts of jokes or comedies are shown repeatedly, they may depreciate the existing gender power relations.

The opposite feminist perspective argues that Thai women have long been exploited. The role of high class women are said to have been historically limited to the family sphere; whereas lower class women have had to work hard to support their families, and thereby been exploited. As the country has been modernized and as the Western way of life to a greater degree has become the norm, traditional social mechanisms used to protect women from being exploited have eroded. For example, in the past, a son-in-law had to stay with his wife’s family and help out with the family chores. This tradition also serves to protect married women from being exploited by their own husbands. At present, although a few rural families still expect this practice from their son-in-laws, it has become increasingly rare, as more and more rural areas become urban or as modernization knocks at their doors. Urbanization and migration have dramatically reduced the family size to only that of man and wife, at least to start with. Both may have to work outside the home in order to sustain the family. If successful they might consider increasing the family with one or two additional members. A Thai wife without the presence of her family therefore runs a higher risk to be exploited or abused by her husband.

With the arrival of behaviourism, Thai social and political scientists have conducted research on political attitudes and behaviours of Thai voters. Although most of the research topics are not directly concerned with women’s political attitudes and participation, gender as a socio-economic variable has always been included in the designs of these quantitative social researches.

As expected, most of the research findings in the past revealed that Thai women were less knowledgeable and less interested in politics than men. Women were also found to participate less than men in elections and in other forms of political activities.
In 1976, a master's degree thesis in political science concerned with political attitudes, knowledge and interests included a study that involved 200 university students and voters. The researcher found that women were both less informed and less interested in elections than men (Pramote Na Ayuddhya 1976).

Another report by two sociologists published one year later found that, from a sample of more than 2,000 voters from all over the country women were less interested in politics and did not vote as much as men. The same research also revealed that men were more inclined than women to be members of a political party (Boonyahitanond and Namatya 1977).

In subsequent general elections, especially the elections of 1988 and 1992, a number of research projects were carried out by the Ministry of Interior Affairs and various scholars. However, most of the research focused on vote-buying behaviour; barriers preventing electorates from reaching polling stations due to the difficulties in travelling from their remote homes to the polling stations; factors influencing the behaviour of vote-buying and selling, etc.

In 1984, Sujit Boonbonggarn and Pornsak Pongpaew studied the voting behaviour in the Thai National Election 1983. The study focused on the relationship between socio-economic factors and the voting behaviour in three provinces: Bangkok, Supanburi, central Thailand and Pattani, southern Thailand. It was interesting to note that the results confirmed their conclusions drawn from the study of Thai voting behaviour in the 1979 election. Overall, the researchers discovered that those who had lower socio-economic status had a greater tendency to vote than those who had higher socio-economic status. The researchers explained that the people from the rural areas were not highly educated and had low monthly incomes which made them more vulnerable to manipulation and mobilization by politicians – especially from the village leaders who had close ties with the local politicians. It was also found that people from rural areas voted to a larger extent than people from urban areas. An interesting finding was that the voters mainly went to the polling stations out of a sense of civic duty and not in an attempt to use their political influ-
Political Participation of Thai Middle-Class Women

e once on government policies. One of the conclusions of the studies is of direct relevance to this chapter, namely that men compared to women in the Bangkok area had strong ideas and chose candidates based on their political parties and policies.\(^1\) Women chose on the basis of their personal acquaintance and not in accordance with their political convictions. Also, men were found to be more confident, taking decisions about who to vote for faster than women (Boonbonggarn and Pongpaew 1984).

As one of the pioneer scholars and the leading authority in studying the voting behaviour in Thai politics, Pornsak Pongpaew has conducted research since the election of 1983. The main focus of his investigations has been why people decide \textit{not} to vote. Three main reasons were found:

\begin{itemize}
  \item the voter was unable to vote due to other engagements;
  \item the voter was not satisfied with the politicians\' behaviour; and
  \item the voter was not eligible to vote
\end{itemize}

According to these findings, those with a higher degree of education did not feel that it had made them more informed as voters. Their education had taught them that it was their duty as citizens to vote. Furthermore, education had not affected their attitudes regarding their ability to influence politics after the election (Pongpaew 1986: 25).

In 1988, another study on the relationship between socio-economic factors and the political participation of voters in a northern province was conducted. The study concluded that gender was one among several socio-economic status (SES) factors which appears to be associated with political participation (Boonlikhit 1988).

In 1991, voting and campaigning behaviour of women in the southern provinces Nakornsriratammarat, Trang, and Phattalung was studied by Pinyo Tanpitayakupt and Darunee Boonpiban. The main purpose of the study was to investigate the significance of female voters for certain candidate\'s victories in the elections. The study also attempted to identify the reason why women decided to vote and assist their favourite candidates during their campaigns. Lastly,
the researchers studied the relationship between social factors and the voting and campaigning behaviour of female voters. In the study, five hundred samples were collected: 100 from Trang, 100 from Phattalung province, and 300 from Nakornsritammarat province. The data gathered from the questionnaires and interviews were correlated and analyzed. It was found that women had a significant impact on the victorious candidates. Indeed, women were found to be very active in politics – their political participation in the election was not limited to voting but also included active involvement in various campaigning activities. Their primary motivation to support the candidates came from a personal admiration for the candidates. Their campaign tactics included persuading their acquaintances to vote for their preferred candidate, support the candidate morally, assisting in distributing leaflets, defending the candidate in various social situations, as well as keeping their acquaintances up-to-date with the politics and activities of their candidate. Finally, the study showed that social factors such as age and educational level were those variables mostly related to voting and campaigning behaviour. That is to say, women aged forty or higher and women with primary levels of education were more likely to participate in political activities.

One of the authors also conducted a series of studies in 1999 and 2003, this time focusing on the political participation of the Thai middle class. He was able to confirm the hypothesis that women participated less than men in every type of political activity, be it the conventional form of politics, e.g. vote-casting, joining a political party etc. or the ‘new types of politics’ e.g. participating in political demonstrations, carrying badges to support a political movement. In addition, women were found to participate less than their male counterparts in all levels of the conventional type of activities i.e. the spectator’s, the participant’s or the activist’s levels (Wongchaisuwan and Wongchaisuwan 1999). A surprising shift was, however, found in the 2003 research on the democratic attitude and voting participation of Thai civil servants working in rural areas. Democratic attitudes voting frequency were not significantly related to the gender of the bureaucrats, which implied – at least for those bureaucrats who
Political Participation of Thai Middle-Class Women

served in regional administrations – that women were as democratic and cast as many votes as men (Wongchaisuwan 2003). However, the occupations of the rest of the respondents were not established, and the researcher was therefore not able to conclude whether or not men and women of other occupations also are equal in terms of democratic attitudes and political participation.

Apart from the above-mentioned research where gender was treated as the only independent variable in the research design, the authors of this research article found another research conducted by female political and social scientists which focused directly on Thai women. The first study was on women and political development; a sample of 446 women from Bangkok and two other provinces in the central region were surveyed and the findings revealed that women’s educational backgrounds, occupations, political experiences as well as their attitudes toward women’s role and status in politics were significantly related to their participation in politics (Kokpol and Sadhuwong 1996). According to one study, research on women’s situation between 1997 and 2001 reveal a biased Thai society. One point made was that men are regarded as superior to women; one of the traditional preconceptions states that wives must follow in their husband’s footsteps. In addition, society requires women to have higher moral standards, while men are allowed more freedom and can do almost anything they want. Respondents with a higher degree of education tended to have a better understanding of the double standard treatment between the two genders, and believed that these kinds of bias would cement social problems like sexual abuse and violence against women. (Chinlumprasert 2007)

THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Our study is aimed at testing hypotheses concerning the relationship between nine socio-economic status (SES) factors of Thai middle class women and the extent of their political participation. Such factors include age, educational level, marital status, occupation, respondent’s own income, family income, number of family dependents, the respondent’s association or club memberships, and
the respondent’s extent of being exposed to news. The dependent variable is a composite scale constructed from nine questions concerning political participation i.e. political discussions within the family, political discussions with non-family entities; the frequency of attending political campaigns, the attempt to persuade others to vote for one’s own preference, party membership, attendance at party meetings, vote-casting in the last general election, and participation in political demonstrations or activist groups. Each of these issues is given equal weight, and the respondent’s political participation score is simply the sum of the score based on these factors. Please observe the table below for the factors used to construct the dependent variable. Most of the indicators used in the calculation of political participation, except the last one, belong to what might be classified by Western scholars as the low or spectacular level of participation in politics (Milbrath and Goel 1977). Only the last indicator, ‘joining a protest group or demonstration,’ is considered rather unconventional and demands a higher level of effort. Although some scholars regard it as an indicator of ‘new politics’ or ‘NSM’ (New Social Movements) (cf. Hague et al. 1993), the inclusion of this kind of action as a separate indicator of new political or social phenomena is still questionable since protests and demonstrations – especially by the workers that are members in a union – existed long before the concept of NSM was invented. This is especially true for Thailand where demonstrations and protests have been raised for decades among factory workers.

Table 8.5: Items used to construct the dependent variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political discussion within family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political discussion with those who are not members of the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance to political campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempt to persuade others to vote according to one’s own preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance to party meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote-casting in the last general election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining any political demonstration or protest group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
workers, most of which are women. However, the majority of the participants were mobilized by union leaders. We do not classify this indicator as traditional or as a new type of political participation.

In order to test these hypotheses, a cross-sectional, non-experimental research design was used. However, due to resource constraints, no type of probability sampling technique has been possible to carry out. Instead the accidental sampling method will be used. At the end of 2003 a data collecting of responses from 300 women living in Bangkok was completed, largely enabled by the kind assistance of the female secretarial staff of the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University and a helping hand from the head librarian of the faculty’s library. Unfortunately, only 249 questionnaires (83 per cent) held a quality sufficient for data analysis. The analysis of the remaining data was performed at two levels: First, zero order relations between the nine SES factors and political participation were investigated; then, in order to make sure that the relations found were not spurious, the researcher retested the correlations by using the statistically controlled strategy of multiple regression analysis.

THE SAMPLE PROFILE

(a) Age

The respondents’ age was asked and the responses were thereafter placed into an interval scale. However, in order to present the distribution of the women’s ages more easily, the ages have been grouped into three categories. Since the majority of the respondents (76.9 per cent) are 30 years old or younger, the age distribution in the sample does not properly represent the overall age distribution among

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–21</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–30</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–58</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.6: Age distribution among the respondents
women in Thailand. Nevertheless, since most of the respondents in the sample are relatively young, they represent a new generation of Thai women. Their behaviour in politics is in itself worth studying.

(b) Education
Table 8.7 reveals that most of the women in the sample have bachelor’s degree or higher education.

Table 8.7: Educational levels among the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational level</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower than Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher than Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(c) Marital Status
As can be seen in Table 8.8, it is apparent that most of the women in the sample are single. This information corresponds to the fact that most women in the sample are relatively young.

Table 8.8: Marital status of the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>85.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.9: Occupation among the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil servants and state enterprise employees</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector employees</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(d) Occupation
The data opposite reveals that those who work in the public and private sectors account for 32.9 per cent of the sample.

(e) Monthly salary
The salary was measured according to an interval scale, and the respondents’ salaries were stated in Baht; however, when being grouped, the mode income lay within the 5,001–10,000 baht interval.

Table 8.10: Monthly salary among the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly salary</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5,000 baht or less</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,001–10,000 baht</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10,000 baht</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(f) Family income
Family income was also measured with an interval scale; the grouped data shows that the modal family income is in the 30,000–50,000 Baht interval.

(g) Family dependents
The following table shows that an average Thai family is still quite large. This may be due to the severe economic crisis the country experienced in 1997, when people moved back in with their families in order for the families to cope with financial problems.
THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Looking at the zero order data analysis, we were able to confirm that the age, educational level, type of occupation, and the exposure to news of the respondents were significantly related to the level of their political participation.

Table 8.13: Political participation; independent variables, statistical findings and significance levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Test statistics</th>
<th>Statistical values</th>
<th>Significance levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.343</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>.041*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s salary</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of family dependents</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association membership</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to news</td>
<td>Pearson’s r</td>
<td>.213</td>
<td>.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status (single, married, divorced)</td>
<td>Cramer’s V</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (public and private sector employee vs. those who have other occupations)</td>
<td>Cramer’s V</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>.046*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Significance level 95%.
Table 8.13 (opposite) shows that age, level of education, and the extent of exposure to news are positively related to women’s political participation, which implies that in the case of these women, the higher the age, education or exposure to news, the more likely they are to participate in politics. While the relation between the women’s age and political participation seems to be the strongest correlation, its strength is only moderate. As for the relation between occupation and political participation, which is the weakest among those relations found to be significant, women who serve as civil servants, employees of public enterprises or those who work in the private sector tend to participate more in political affairs than those who do not in these sectors. These findings generally confirmed our expectations as well as more general expectations. As women grow older, study for higher degrees and are more exposed to news, it is likely that they become more politically aware and informed; and these qualities are in turn likely to facilitate their participation in public affairs. Being an office worker either in the public or private sector, a woman is likely to be exposed to more political information and thus encouraged to participate in politics. Education as well as news or information serve to expand their political horizons, and one may conclude that people and societies become more modernized through education and news exposure. Modernization is in turn related to a society’s level of democratization, and therefore these two independent variables are indispensable for increased political participation, regardless of gender.

The variables which are nominally measured i.e. marital status and occupation, are recoded into dummy variables before being entered into the calculation process. The default statistical values from the statistical package, .05 significant levels for F to enter and .10 for F to remove, are used in order to conform to the convention of data processing.

The regression analysis proceeds in three steps. In step one, women’s age is the first variable to enter the regression equation – the correlation (Pearson’s r) between age and political participation is .274, and the variation in age is able to predict 7.5 per cent of
the variation in political participation. When adjusted however, the ability to predict is reduced to 7.0 per cent. The above table shows the details.

The extent of being exposed to news is the second variable included in the second step of the calculation, multiple r value between both independent variables, age and the extent of news exposure, and the dependent variable increases to .333, and the variation in both independent variables, considered together, is able to explain 10.1 per cent of the variation in dependent variable (see Table 8.15).

In the third step, women’s educational level was included into the new regression equation. The multiple r value between the three independent variables considered together and the dependent vari-

Table 8.14: Model 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig. F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>9.046</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>4.566E-02</td>
<td>.274</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>14.633</td>
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Table 8.15: Model 2

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<th>R</th>
<th>Multiple R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
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<th>Sig. F</th>
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<tr>
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<td>.274</td>
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<tr>
<td>News exposure level</td>
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<td>.333</td>
<td>.111</td>
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Table 8.16: Model 3

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<tr>
<td>News exposure level</td>
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<td>.376</td>
<td>.141</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td>9.772</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<td>.105</td>
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</table>

256
able increases to .376, and the adjusted r square value is .127, which means that the variation in three independent variables together is able to explain 12.7 per cent of political participation of the women (see Table 8.16).

No other variables outside the regression equation have the probability of F-to-enter value equal to or less than .05, and no independent variables included in the last equation have the probability of F-to-remove value equal to or higher than .10; the step-wise regression analysis, therefore, reaches the final stage.

CONCLUSION

Comparing the zero-order statistics with the outputs of the multiple regressions, only three independent variables, namely age, the extent of news exposure and educational level are significantly correlated with the women’s participation in politics. Judging from the multiple r value (.376), it can be concluded that the three independent variables together correlated moderately with the dependent variable. Each of the three independent variables was found to be positively correlated with women’s political participation. As for the women’s occupation, which related to political participation at the zero-order hypothesis testing, was later found to be spurious when the multi-various analysis had been conducted. The spurious zero-order relation between women’s occupation and political participation is either explained by women’s age, educational level or the level of news exposure. It may seem likely that both age and educational level would correlate with each other and explain the relation between women’s occupation and their level of participation in politics.

DISCUSSION

Democracy – as an ideology, a way of life or a political regime – was strange to the Thai society, but was introduced to the country during the reign of King Rama V due to fear of being colonized, a fear articulated by Thai students who had been sent abroad to study under royal patronage. These graduates, who had been exposed to Western ideologies during ‘the Age of Ideology’, internalized the liberal democratic values and, to a certain extent, those of socialism.
As Great Britain and France had threatened to colonize the country, they found that a government ruled by law and not by the whims of a monarch would elevate the country to a more civilized status, which in turn would help to facilitate the acceptance of the country into the community of the modern states and thereby save it from becoming colonized. Upon the students return to serve the country, they humbly put forward the benefits of a constitutional rule to the King. The King was, however, hesitant and the bloodless revolution of 1932 became a watershed for Thai politics, and a new era of unstable constitutional governments began.

Thai politics in the age of constitutional rule has been entrapped in a vicious circle (Dhiravegin 1992). Elected governments were either too weak to rule or accused of corruption by those who initiated a coup d’état. A new Parliament was assembled after each coup and assigned to draft a more democratic constitution, of which one took more than a decade to complete. 16 constitutions have thus far still been considered inadequate to promote a truly democratic government. Ironically, most of the coups claimed that they had toppled the elected government on behalf of democracy and good governance. One puppet government even announced a 12-year-plan for democratization. One explanation for the instability of the elected governments has been the low levels of voter turnout. In many constituencies, some 20,000 votes have been sufficient to secure a seat in Parliament. Vote-buying has therefore been practiced by most politicians who wanted to occupy political positions at the national or local level. The widespread practice of vote-buying and allegedly rigged elections have weakened the legitimacy of the elected governments and thereby subjected them to a vulnerability of becoming toppled by a coup. As discussed above, several scholars who have conducted research on voting behaviour of eligible Thai voters found that those who live in Bangkok and other urban areas cast their votes to a lesser extent than those living in rural areas (Pongpaew 1986). These findings were rather surprising when compared to the generalizations and theories founded in Western political contexts, where urban dwellers to a larger extent tend to cast their votes than
those who live in rural areas (Milbrath and Goel 1977). Some Thai political scientists might be tempted to explain it as the alienation of the educated urban dwellers. A better explanation may be found in Robert Dahl’s work on certain groups of citizens who chose not to participate in politics: those who perceived that there was no real choice in the elections tends not to vote (Dahl 1984). This explanation is confirmed by a large voter turnout when the leader of the religiously-oriented party promised clean politics and later won the election for Governor of Bangkok Metropolis several years ago. The then newly established Palang Dham party, which promised clean politics, was perceived by the educated and well-informed Bangkok voters as different from the older and morally corrupt parties. As a result the number of votes in the election for governor rose dramatically.

On the contrary, most rural voters turned up at the polls, largely due to the fact that the department of local administration, which supervises the elections, campaigned for a higher voter turnout. In addition, the larger participation rates in the rural areas can be explained by the sub-culture of local voters feeling morally obliged to return the favours to the patrons or candidates who gave the highest bids.

Aiming at reducing the impact of vote-buying, therefore, the 1997 Constitution – written to provide a framework for ‘political reform’ – stipulates that voting is the duty of every citizen. Certain political rights are to be suspended temporarily for those who fail to cast their votes. These measures have not yet become effective since vote-buying has persisted at both national and local elections despite the close supervision of the newly institutionalized Office of Electoral Commissioners. Politics in Thailand have become so commercialized that the capitalist-turned-politicians are willing to invest almost unlimited amounts of money in elections and go to any length to see to it that they themselves and/or their factions win. As the annual budget of the Thai government has surpassed one trillion Baht, the stakes are so high that every politician desires to control its allocation. In addition, holding offices in the cabinet is perhaps the
best way for the capitalist-turned-politicians to protect and expand their national and international business conglomerates.

Although there was no room for Thai women in politics at the time of democratization, the universal suffrage was adopted without prior demands from women and other minority groups. It is suggested that Thailand as well as other post-colonial countries in Asia and Africa, with the exception of South Africa, enacted the universal suffrage law and applied it to their first elections because most countries in the West had already accepted the practice of universal suffrage (Caraway 2004). Nevertheless, one might suspect that the new group of Thai ruling elites adopted the universal suffrage because it became a symbol of democracy, not because they valued the virtue of women’s contribution to politics. Having become enfranchised did not warrant women’s participation in politics since the traditional role for Thai women was confined solely to family matters. Therefore, it is not surprising that a lot of research conducted in Thailand has found that women have been less interested in politics and participated less in elections. In Thai social and political context, the adoption of the universal suffrage by the new regime without prior demands from women might also have the counter-effect of delaying women’s political consciousness as well as participation. Without a common history of political struggle, women’s perspective has easily been confined within the so-called male hegemony. This might, to a certain extent, explain why Thai women have been slow to appreciate their roles as citizens.

The findings in this research show that women’s age, educational level and exposure to news positively correlate with their participation in elections and show a bright prospect for women’s political roles in the near future. As more than half of Thailand’s population consists of women, and, at present, girls tend to receive better and higher education than boys, it is not premature to expect that women in the near future will be more active in the political and social domains.

One should be cautious about the fact that age was found to be the strongest independent variable for predictions of women’s political roles.
engagement, as the age distribution of the sample has a bias for those who are 30 years old or younger. However, suffice it to say that at least for those women in our sample, age is positively correlated with political participation. The findings correspond to the results of most previous research findings on the relation between age of the eligible voters, regardless of gender, and the possibility of their turnouts at the polls. One explanation why young adults participate less in politics than older may simply be because they are more preoccupied with themselves, the opposite sex, and social events rather than politics. It is quite likely that as women grow older, they will participate more in politics. A second explanation may be found in the post-modernistic literature (Inglehart 1990; Inglehart 1997). Today’s post-modern society has moved the sub-culture of the younger generation towards a greater concern with personal and social issues e.g. self-expression, health and environmental problems, which transgress traditional political practices. The young people participates less in conventional types of political actions not because they are less concerned with politics and society in general, but because they do not believe that the traditional form of politics can solve the increasingly complex problems of today. Instead of casting their votes or joining a political party, the young generation may prefer to find their own means and forms of more direct participation, such as new social movements or other forms of so-called new politics. If the latter explanation is true, the future generation of citizens might not participate as much in traditional forms of politics.

The findings of this research showed that the level of education as well as the extent of being exposed to news are positively correlated with women’s political participation – a finding supported by the work of Harold Laski and his concept of political freedom. According to Laski, written statements on freedom in a constitution do not warrant true political freedom if the state still denies its citizen sufficient education or information on state affairs. Only the educated and the well-informed can exercise their freedom in a meaningful way (Laski 1967). As mentioned above, girls tend to receive better and higher education than boys, and so the next generation of female citizens can
be expected to occupy increasingly important positions in bureaucracy and politics. The globalization and the evolution of the Internet also helps educated citizens regardless of sex to obtain diverse information needed for decisions of all types, be they political or not. Thai women in the next ten to fifteen years can be expected to be prominent in both private and public domains.

NOTE

1 Other factors included in the study were age, education, professions, and residency.

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CHAPTER NINE

My Story as a Woman in Thai Politics

SUPATRA MASDIT*

When I first began my political career, people kept asking what had inspired me to choose a career in politics. In my opinion it is the only path to alleviate social disparities effectively. Working as a lecturer and as a volunteer for social development projects prior to my career in politics, I realized that I could have only minimal impact on societal injustice no matter how hard I tried. Several chronic social problems were located in the very core of Thailand’s main structure, the civil service. Social ills like corruption, social disparity and unfair distribution of resources cannot be solved without political influence and so my step into the political arena felt inevitable.

Throughout my political career I have met hundreds, perhaps thousands, of women who wanted to work for a better society. None of them worked as professional politicians. How I wish that they had become politicians, for men and women share the burden of social responsibility.

MY ROLE MODEL

One of my most vivid childhood memories was watching my father use two fingers to type a petition in response to poverty among the

* Khunying Supatra Masdit, who has been a prominent political figure in Thailand, is one of the most well-known Thais in the world. This is the first time her autobiography has been published in English.
people in our village. My father first worked as a rural journalist but later became an outspoken national politician. He fought relentlessly against social injustice and corruption during the authoritarian military regime and he kept pushing those issues during Thailand's transition to democracy. In time, he was thought of as a hero, not only by his children but also by the people in Nakorn Si Thammarat, a southern province in Thailand. Among his many inspiring qualities, it was his political will that affected me the most.

The political philosophy he taught me involved an egalitarian society, which included gender equality. Even though I grew up in a male-dominated society I never felt that girls did not have the same potential as boys. My father never stopped me from pursuing something due to my gender and he supported me as long as I could argue my case.

**DISCOVERING THE WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE, POVERTY AND OPPRESSION**

In high school my perception of politics and gender equality was challenged. It was the custom that teachers chose an outstanding student for the position as chairperson of the Student Council. Just before the decision was made I approached the principal of the school and suggested that a few candidates, boys and girls, should compete for the position and he agreed. Each student was allowed to vote for one boy and one girl. The campaign brought me an overwhelming victory and the number of votes on my behalf far exceeded the winner on the boys’ side. The tacit rule, however, favoured the male candidate. I was firmly opposed to such gender-bias and as a compromise I requested that we should be named co-chairpersons.

At Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, where I pursued my bachelor’s degree in mass communication, I was involved in several student activities. School activities in Bangkok helped me develop my leadership abilities and I was also involved in the social development volunteer programs. My work as a volunteer was a unique experience and I learned some unforgettable lessons about the value of life. These people helped train us for the tasks that were at hand. Over four years, students in the program experienced the hardships
My Story as a Woman in Thai Politics

of rural life during summer holidays. We helped the people build wells and schools and we helped teach their children to read and write. Even though I grew up in the countryside I knew very little about people living in poverty and the way they suffer because of it. My years as a volunteer gave me a profound understanding of rural poverty and it became the cornerstone of my political commitment.

After my graduation, I pursued my passion for social issues as a volunteer at Thammasat University. I took part in a one year program that was launched in order to foster a sense of social responsibility in new graduates. This program was initiated by my mentor Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, who was the Dean of the Economics faculty at the time. After I had completed this program I was hired as a lecturer at Kasetsart University, where I stayed for two years until I returned to the Thammasat Office for Graduate Volunteers as a member of the faculty. When I was working as the secretary-general of the Mae Klong Integrated Rural Development Project, Dr. Puey set in motion a pilot program on sustainable development, where the key element was the participation of the people in the village.

My first opportunity to enter the political arena came in 1975 when I was awarded a scholarship for my master’s degree at the East-West Center in Hawaii. The same year Prime Minister M. R. Kukrit Pramoj abruptly dissolved the parliament and an election was scheduled to take place in April 1976. At 27 years of age I decided to change course and I applied to become a candidate for the Democrat Party, in which my father was one of the key members. Even though my father wanted me to pursue my study in Hawaii, he let me choose my own future. Much to my dismay, Mr. Damrong Latthapipat, the secretary-general of the Democrat Party, rejected my application on grounds similar to the arguments my father had put forth. At my age, career opportunities in politics would be many but I might never get another scholarship for a master’s degree. Mr. Damrong recommended me to come back after I had taken my degree and later I was grateful for his advice.

As I got my things together and headed for Hawaii the Democrat Party won a landslide victory in the election. My father, who was an
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elected Member of Parliament and a senior member of the party, was appointed a ministerial post. Things changed on 6 October of that year, when armed soldiers attacked student activists at Thammasat University and hundreds were killed. Thousands fled into the jungle and joined the Communist movement. The coup d’état that followed blatantly closed another chapter in the Thai people’s quest for democracy and plunged the country into yet another dark era of military dictatorship.

On the other side of the globe I watched the uncensored television footage of the student massacre. At first I could not grasp that what I saw was real. Students, male and female alike, had been brutally mutilated and killed. Female students had been raped and abused to death. While the coup d’état was a shock, the violent killings devastated me. That women are continuously exposed to such unnecessary use of force during times of conflict is perplexing to me. Why do women become the target during times of political hostility? Previously I had been prepared to relent on certain issues, unlike my father who was indomitable and would not compromise his democratic ideology, which was based on the idea of people’s power. The student massacre changed my political point of view completely. The societal injustice I witnessed as a volunteer and the horrors of military suppression spurred me to take political action and I pledged to fight for democracy.

Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, my mentor, was forced into exile when the government was overthrown. He was, eventually, invited by the US Congress to elaborate on the situation in Thailand to the western world. Dr. Puey was a crusader for democracy and he inspired a whole generation of freedom fighters in the 1970s. During the time I worked with him I was enlightened by his insights into politics. He guided Thailand onto the path of democracy, the kind of democracy that would result in an egalitarian society.

As a protest against the military authoritarian regime, a network of Thai students along with students from all over the world sent petitions demanding that military perpetrators be brought to justice and democracy be restored. As I joined the student networks to put
pressure on the Thai government, I dove into the world of books on the subject of political ideology, trying to make sense of existing political differences and the ensuing conflicts.

THE BEGINNING OF MY POLITICAL CAREER
The aftershocks of political turmoil had begun to fade in 1979 and a general election was held. I returned to Thailand with a master's degree and a renewed political commitment. When my father's health deteriorated I was offered the opportunity to take his place as a candidate in my home town of Nakorn Si Thammarat. The political rallies were tough for a new and inexperienced candidate. Unlike my rivals, my campaign did not concentrate on rallies alone. One of my concerns was the problems in my constituency and I dedicated most of my time campaigning in remote villages, mingling with villagers and listening to the problems they had. With time, the bonds that grew developed beyond that of a politician and his/her electorate and became more like those of family.

Even though I was a female candidate in a male-dominated region I was very happy to receive a positive response to my candidacy. It was this response along with my father's support and the support of the Democrat Party that helped me gain a seat in Parliament as the second female Member of Parliament (MP) from the south. Many political veterans said that the second election is always much tougher, however I won the second election and the third and the forth and so on. The hard work of an unknown number of women (who have never been recognized for their efforts) has built the foundation to my success in politics.

I never felt disadvantaged because of my gender when I attended the political rallies. On the contrary, it gave me an edge that my male rivals lacked. Many female voters who gave me their vote later told me that they had done so against their husbands' advice. They told me it was easier for them to approach a female politician with gender-related issues. There is little doubt that their votes, which constitute about half of the total, contributed to my success.

During my first term in Parliament, I was one of nine elected female MPs (about six per cent of the 301 MPs). I remember giv-
ing an interview to a political magazine during which I emphasized two points: the public image of female politicians and the frequency of general elections. As a female politician I represented all Thai women in Parliament. If I earned any credit it was attributed to me personally but if I were to act unethically in any way it would affect the overall image of women adversely. With such a responsibility I was determined to prove that a woman can be a good politician. As a woman I probably had to work three times as hard as my male colleagues. My already full schedule revolved around taking the time to visit my constituency in the south every weekend to touch base with my voters in order to solve the problems they had with various governmental agencies. I served on the administrative committee of the Democrat Party, and as a committee member in Parliament. Sometimes meetings lasted until the wee hours of the morning. It was my hope that my hard work would be recognized and translate into enthusiastic support for female newcomers.

During my first term in politics I was very interested in how the democratic process would be served in the ensuing elections. At that time I was convinced that politics would improve as people experienced more elections. I believed that the repetitive patterns would help advance the public’s political maturity. Voters would eventually learn to screen out bad politicians. Time has proven me wrong, however, as politics has worsened rather than improved. In each election more bad politicians buy their way into politics. These candidates are businessmen who work to gain their companies an advantage over their rivals under the guise of democratic ideals, as they have discovered that buying votes is worth the investment. When greedy politicians are ahead in the game, women find it even more difficult to enter politics unless they have strong support from their respective political parties and the female electorate.

In the past decades I have seen many well-qualified Thai women of high calibre take on professional challenges at a relentless pace and succeed. Women from the grass-roots level in rural communities and women in urban professions have earned great recognition for their achievements in all areas except one: politics. It is one of
the few areas that women are reluctant to explore. Political veterans confirm the consensus that it is not easy for women to succeed in politics, however it is not impossible. If they have the right key, the door to politics will open up and welcome them. Even so, not many women take on the political challenge. Why not?

GENDER-BIAS IN POLITICS

The lack of training is one reason women do not enter politics, but the majority of women in Thailand believe that politics is not their territory. It is the realm of men, who play dirty, and women do not belong. Women across the world believe that politics is a man’s world and it is this apathy that has created a vacuum in the administration of the Thai government.

As in most male-dominated governments, there is strong emphasis on economics, foreign policy and technology, often referred to as ‘big business’. Social issues like education, crime, health care and gender equality are often considered ‘soft’ issues, or women’s issues, and are therefore given low priority. In reality, however, these are issues that affect women in their everyday life. When health care is inadequate, women suffer most because they have to care for the family. When crime is rampant women are most vulnerable and when education is limited women have less access.

Although there is no obvious discrimination in Parliament, the male majority has a subtly sexist attitude. Some of the proposed laws touching on the rights of women were at times mocked or greeted with blatant sexist remarks. Surprisingly, I have never felt that I was discriminated against by my male colleagues in Parliament, at least not until I introduced laws that touched on gender issues, when I discovered an apparent rift between men and women in the political arena. For example, I proposed an amendment to criminal law that would extend legal protection for girls to the age of 15 (instead of 13) in cases of sexual assault. Male representatives protested vigorously expressing cynical or sexist opinions, which reflected the existence of chauvinistic attitudes. A similar reaction was apparent when I introduced an amendment to local administration laws that dis-
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criminated against women working as village leaders. Almost every male MP took his turn to speak against it. Most of their arguments were based on deeply rooted chauvinistic perceptions of women as the weaker sex and therefore not qualified for such a position.

Although some of these laws survived these attacks, many others failed. Gender balance in politics would definitely help restore a balance in terms of priorities. The absence of women in the House of Representatives slows down the legal process, which in turn affects half of Thailand’s population.

When I first started out, more than 20 years ago, I must admit that it took more than just passion for a woman to make it in politics. One needed to have strong political ties, mostly through family with a background in politics. Women from political families already have an established political platform. Several successful female political leaders in Asia belong to families with a background in politics. These women have gained experience from their surroundings. Corazon Aquino, the former President of the Philippines, said she was just a housewife, but she certainly gained a knack for politics by serving her husband and his fellow political colleagues coffee. Women must be able to enter politics through venues other than family ties. We need to give women from different backgrounds access to the political arena.

Educating women, providing them with knowledge of the democratic process of election and the role of MPs in Parliament, is crucial. Such training should not end after a candidate wins an election since what comes afterward requires even more training. A good politician should not just impress the public with his or her policy but needs to put it into effect. Without proper training one may not know where to start.

During my first term, I was lucky enough to have some political veterans in the same party to guide me, especially with regards to my performance in parliamentary debates; they pointed out flaws in my speeches and I did the same thing for other female newcomers, regardless of their political orientation. Many were grateful simply because such guidance did not exist in their respective parties, leav-
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...ing them to find their own way. Aside from guiding other women in politics I really wished for women in politics to find some common ground, no matter what party they represented. In 1980 I initiated the Women MPs’ Group, where female MPs could meet and work on a common agenda. It was my hope that our solidarity would strengthen our voice in the Parliament when it came to issues that are especially important for women.

TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS

I set up a trainee course in politics for women in the general public. Those who aspired to become politicians were asked to write to me about what inspired and motivated them. I received about 300 letters from which I selected 30 women who showed the most potential. The purpose of the course was to prepare them for candidacy in the general elections of 1992. Only three trainees remained by the time for election. The rest declined and the general consensus was that they did not believe they could win if they had to abide by the mandatory rule of clean politics. Even though I may come across as a stickler for the principles of the democratic process, I strongly believe that a candidate should stick to his or her principles while taking part in an election. Should one be elected it would be with one’s integrity intact and in accordance with true democracy. I was happy to see one of the three candidates running for the first election in 1992 win the second election the same year (there were two general elections in 1992). She is now on her third term in Parliament.

It was not until 1999 that I decided to take on yet another challenge by organizing a two year political trainee program for aspiring female politicians. This course proved my point that every political candidate has to have a very good understanding of the constituency they represent before they become a candidate. In other words, one has to touch base with the people. It would undermine the whole purpose of democracy if politicians barely know the people and the problems of the community he or she represents. We chose to locate the program in a remote province in the north of Thailand. One of our trainees worked with local women’s groups on...
various issues from rural problems to democracy and the processes of democracy and the response was one of enthusiasm. Eventually, we had built mutual trust and respect. By the end of the program one of our trainees decided to take part in the 2001 general elections as a candidate.

At that time I was certain that we had chosen the right approach and that she would get a significant number of votes after working with the community for a longer period of time. But only a few thousand votes were cast on her behalf. This development was heartbreaking and quite unexpected. Later the villagers in this constituency apologized for giving their votes to profiteers. I was forced to rethink my approach for the spread of democratic education. Our trainee had done everything right and so, where had we gone wrong?

I came to the conclusion that providing courses is not enough. Another course, designed especially for voters, is needed to prevent people from being manipulated by profiteers. It was also at this point that I became aware of the damage profit-seeking politicians could have on our democratic system. If nothing is done to prevent this development there will be no room for honest politicians in the next election. The tragic events of 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 have taught us how corrupt dictatorships can ruin the democratic process and undermine people's fundamental human rights. Thai democracy is vulnerable to military takeover and profit-seeking politicians. We need a new political approach to protect our democracy.

My hope for the improvement of how politics is undertaken lies with half of the eligible voters: women. I believe that we can educate voters and that if we empower women they will not have to enter politics on the wrong side of the democratic process. It is the power of these voters that I hope will transform the politics of today into democracy.

**ESTABLISHING CAPWIP**

During a forum organized by UNESCO and UNIFEM in Bangkok 1990 I received enthusiastic support from other female leaders and NGOs worldwide for my concept of ‘transformative politics’. The concept of transformative politics is a spontaneous social movement to push
for political reform by empowering women. Through continuous and systematic training, women from all parts of society can broaden their democratic education. They can learn how to empower themselves and press for political reform. Transformative politics is not limited to their roles as potential politicians since the roles of the voters, the contributors, the canvassers and the campaigners are equally important.

Efforts to support women in decision-making positions is crucial. In 1992 we established the Center for Asian-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP) based in Manila, and I was appointed chairwoman. CAPWIP is a non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO), which is dedicated to the promotion of women’s equal representation in decision-making processes. This organization takes part in the work for accountable governance, characterized by gender equality, sustainable development and peaceful methods.

CAPWIP established a Women in Politics group (WIP) in each participating country, to promote women’s understanding of politics. Functioning as the hub, CAPWIP, interacts with the local networks to disseminate ideologies, information an educational support. Women working at political institutes, organizations and movements in countries all over the Asia-Pacific were inspired by CAPWIP. In 1996 a congress on Women in Politics for the Pacific was organized by CAPWIP in collaboration with the Pacific UNIFEM office, which resulted in the creation of the organization for Women in Politics in the Pacific Center (WIPPAC), which continues to be active. WIPPAC is still reaping benefits as the number of women in politics and on decision-making levels has increased.

Although the impact of CAPWIP’s training has varied from one place to another, the foundation for transformative politics had been established.

The First Female Minister

During the first seven years after I was elected in 1979 I did not achieve much while pushing for legal amendments that would enhance women’s status. Within three months of starting work as a minister at the Prime Minister’s Office in 1986, I addressed almost
all the concerns I had raised during my political rallies. One of my major achievements was the establishment of permanent office for the National Bureau of Women’s Affairs, which had been postponed for over ten years. From then on women could continue their work without interruption. Even though there were periods of political instability, the bureau survived the winds of political change. Several bills on women’s issues that had been on the shelf for a long time were dusted off, approved and implemented. Such an achievement was unprecedented, especially considering how quickly it moved. I do not believe there have been any great achievements yet. The most important change I have set in motion is the change in attitudes. After my experience as a female minister I was convinced that women must enter high-ranking decision-making positions to be able to put their own ideas into action.

INTERMISSION

From 1992–1995 I took a break from politics and worked as the convener for the NGO Forum. It is a parallel forum to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995. I was nominated for this position because of my experience as a politician and my work at CAPWIP, which enabled me to bring the two forums together. As the convener, I travelled around the world to attend these forums while taking stock of the opinions expressed. The mission statement of the Platform for Action sought to empower women. It aimed at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and at removing all the obstacles to women’s active participation in all spheres of public and private life, through equal participation in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. Effectively, mission statement stressed the significance of men and women sharing equal responsibility at home, at work and in the international community.

WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS

After the Beijing Conference I resumed my political work in Thailand and in 1997 I was once more granted the office of minister. Once
again, I took up the opportunity and adopted the Beijing Platform for Action into the national plan. I also introduced a trainee program for potential female politicians in several municipalities throughout the country to prepare them to run for municipal and provincial administrative positions. Women with a similar political commitment can certainly accomplish what I have or more if they have the chance to climb the political ladder to the decision-making level. What is more important today is for women to get involved in politics.

One aspect the National Democratic Institute (NDI), chaired by Madeleine Albright, put on the international agenda in December 2003, during an international conference in Washington D.C., was that women’s ability to enter politics depends on the political party. Women in politics are held back by their male colleagues. Political parties often assign women to districts where they know they have slim chances to win. The participants in the conference concluded that all political parties everywhere should include a policy statement in their manifesto regarding recruiting and training women for political leadership.

A Global Action Plan was formed at this conference and its statements regarding gender equality recommended the increase of democracy within political parities, the creation of strategic plans for this purpose and support for women participating in the quest for ‘transformative leadership’. Political parties need to put women into management positions to enhance their administrative skills. Women should be represented in all of the party’s ministries from foreign affairs to defence.

Women often hit a glass ceiling while pursuing a political career. Political parties should allocate positions by quota at every level of the administration, thus securing women’s equality in the decision-making process. Women’s political judgment should further be respected by their male peers as long as it will benefit the common good. Men’s preconceived perception of women have led several female politicians to prioritize the same issues men do. Women’s issues should be elevated to the national agenda because these issues affect all of us.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I remember my father’s dedication to social justice for the poor and the disadvantaged very well. To this day, their situation is yet to be resolved. There has been great economic progress during the past decades but it is all an illusion. The situation of people living in poverty has worsened while the rich keep getting richer. The distorted distribution of resources favours the rich as corrupt politicians misuse their positions for personal gain, and social unrest is brewing. A confrontation due to economic disparities may be inevitable unless true democracy is restored.

In times of conflict, it is women who shoulder the hardships while their voices go unheard in the houses of power. To improve women’s status socially, politically and financially is after all a way to enable them to improve our society. I have been asked how long it will take us to get there if women do not become aware of their own potential. All my years as a woman in politics have convinced me that transformative politics is, at present, the only effective approach to empowering women.
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NIAS Press is the autonomous publishing arm of NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, a research institute located at the University of Copenhagen. NIAS is partially funded by the governments of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden via the Nordic Council of Ministers, and works to encourage and support Asian studies in the Nordic countries. In so doing, NIAS has been publishing books since 1969, with more than two hundred titles produced in the past few years.