BY WOMEN, FOR WOMEN

A Study of Women's Organizations in Thailand

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACWO  ASEAN Confederation of Women’s Organizations
APDC  Asia and Pacific Development Centre
APHD  Asian Partnership for Human Development
APSW  Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women
ASEAN  Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUA  American University Alumni
AWL  Association for Women Lawyers
AWRAN  Asian Women’s Research and Action Network
BP  “Be Prepared” or “bumpen prayote”
CONTOUR  Concerns for Tourism
CU  Chulalongkorn University
CUSO  Canadian University Service Overseas
CUSRI  Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute
CWWP  Committee on Women’s Welfare Promotion
ECTWT  Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism
EMPOWER  Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation
FFW  Foundation For Women
FOW  Friends of Women
GGAT  Girl Guides Association of Thailand
GO  government organization
ICCO  Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (Dutch)
ICW  International Council of Women
IYW  International Year of Women (1975)
List of Abbreviations

LDAP    Local Development Assistance Program
NCSW    National Council of Social Welfare
NCWT    National Council of Women of Thailand
NESDB   National Economic and Social Development Board
NGO     non-governmental organization
NOVIB   Netherlands Organisation for International Development Cooperation (Dutch)
OISCA   Overseas Industrial and Spiritual Cooperation Agency (Japan)
PVO     private voluntary organization
SAUW    Siamese Association of University Women
TDSC    Thai Development Service Committee
TVS     Thai Volunteer Service
TU      Thammasat University
WAGGGS  World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts
WCB     Women's Cultural Bureau
WCC     Women's Cultural Club
WCPA    Women's Cultural Promotion Association
WIC     Women's Information Centre
WID     Women In Development
WIDCIT  Women In Development Consortium In Thailand
WLTCID  Women Leadership Training for Community Development
WVCD    Women Volunteers for Community Development
Women's movements are one of the most significant social movements today in many countries. Thailand, where women's groups are just emerging, provides an interesting case study. This book is an exploratory work to document and analyse, and publish for the first time, case studies of women's organizations in Thailand.

Having been born, brought up and initially educated in Bangkok, and having witnessed the activities of student revolt during 1973–76 as a college student, the first author wanted to know more about the growth of subsequent social actions. Only after working for a higher degree in the United States did she realize how closely her own growth as a woman was linked to Thai culture and history. A desire to study the lives of Thai women and their organizations was a natural extension of her developed consciousness as a woman and of her interest in social action. Her familiarity with various women's groups and her identity as a native Thai gained for her some acceptance from them. Yet, being educated and employed abroad, she was an outsider, and allowed some degree of objectivity.

The second author had a general theoretical background in Southeast Asia and grass roots development groups. He participated in all aspects of the study (research and design), and in most interviews with key women of various groups.

This research has taken us several field visits and years to complete between 1985–90. Many colleagues and friends have helped us in several ways through discussions, comments and critiques to complete the work. The research work began in 1985 with the encouragement of the Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Professor K.S. Sandhu, under an
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Credit for most of the information, analyses and merit of the book goes to these Thai women activists and academics. Any shortcomings are ours.

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PART I
BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL CONTEXT
I INTRODUCTION

A Study of Thai Women and Their Organizations

Women constitute half of the population, and they are an integral part of family and the labour force. Their effective integration into the process of socio-economic development of a society is, therefore, of paramount importance. However, the meaning and the process of “integration” have not emerged clearly in development plans. Integration into what, and by what means? How can women actively participate in shaping the future of their societies? Do women’s organizations have a role in this process? The concept of development itself has been a topic of debate: should the development process give priority to welfare or to growth, to income generation or to consciousness raising, to Western-influenced urban development or to reconstruction based on indigenous cultural roots? Not only women’s participation but the means thereof have been questioned. Sometimes, increased participation is considered the natural consequence of an overall development of a society. Sometimes, this is demanded by women as a separate agenda, and is often expressed through the formation of women’s autonomous organizations.

Studies on economic development programmes (especially in agriculture) show that they often bypass or adversely affect women. These programmes frequently weaken women’s positions in their families and communities (Boserup 1970; Tinker 1990). The adverse effect of development on women has been studied by several authors (Beneria 1985; Dauber and Cain 1981; Tinker 1976) who show that, from economic development and agricultural mechanization programmes, men derive most of the benefits while women remain in the same or deteriorating states. That is why the “Forward Looking Strategies”, the consensus document of the 1985 international meeting in Nairobi marking the end of the UN Women’s Decade, defines “total development” to include political,
social, cultural and other dimensions of human life. Exemplifying this new sensitivity, a new Third World women's group called DAWN, formed in 1985, has demanded an end of gender-based inequality which limits women's access to productive resources such as land, capital and labour.1

In order to increase the potential of women and to provide an effective means of integrating them in the development process, we must understand not only the specific society in which the target women are born and socialized but also what they perceive as their immediate needs. A country-specific study, assessing the structural and cultural factors which shape women's status and assigned role, is helpful in formulating policies and strategies for improving their position. At the same time, the contributions and demands of women, particularly from deprived social groups, also need attention so that the majority of women can give feedback and act as both beneficiaries of and participants in the development process. Since women's voluntary organizations have been one form of their social and independent participation, the study of women's voluntary groups or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in this case in Thailand, is essential for gaining insight into the issues of Thai women and their role in the development process.2

Thailand is an agrarian society where agriculture has been, and still is, the foundation of the country's social and economic structure and Thai women, especially those among the rural peasantry, have played a significant role in family and community life. Historically they have been involved in agriculture and trade. The bilateral kinship system has given them considerable power and importance in the family, and freedom of mobility in the community (Hanks and Hanks 1963). However, with the introduction of modern agricultural inputs for export-oriented production, women's power base—in agriculture and trade—has suffered (Phongpaichit 1982). While capitalism has penetrated the hinterland (improving the profits of capitalists and introducing labour-saving technology), and consumerism has been on the rise, jobs in the rural areas have remained limited. And without enough education and skills-training, rural women lack access to employment in the modern sector. Thus, they lack jobs both at the local village level and in urban areas as well. In spite of their high rate of participation in the labour force, almost 40 per cent of the total, most of the women continue to hold low-paid unskilled jobs, and remain neglected in health and education (Paitoonpong 1982). Thus Thailand, far from being a stable society, is undergoing rapid change with the city exploiting the countryside, and with more women being proletarianized.

Programmes organized for women by Thai government-assisted organizations or by international development agencies are few, and have not been always beneficial to poor women. The evaluation of USAID-sponsored women-oriented programmes of siriculture indicates that the positions of trainers
and managers in these programmes were male-dominated, and unfairly benefited those families already possessing resources (Mitchell et al. 1979). Similarly, income-generating programmes for women such as sewing and handicrafts may be beneficial to the market economy and urban consumers as well as convenient to trainers' backgrounds, but they do not necessarily meet the specific and immediate basic needs of rural women.

How can the urban and gender bias in national policy be reduced? How can the seclusion of women from politics be lessened? Is there a way to improve the health, education and employment prospects for the majority of Thai women? And what practical and theoretical steps are feasible and desirable for Thai women and their society? These questions and challenges have been addressed by some of the contemporary women NGOs in Thailand.

Before this century, there were individual cases of protest and resistance by royal women such as the legendary Queen Chamadevi, Queen Suriyothai and Queen Saowapa, and commoners such as the women of Bang Rachan and Thanphuying Mo (Thailand 1983). Most of these women were heroines who, in the absence of men, fought against invaders of the kingdom in defence of their society. However, there were some cases of common women who contested their right to choose their partners. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the situation changed slightly; men of the royalty and nobility encouraged their women to modernize and become socially active. This resulted in an upsurge of "early feminism" and women-oriented writing published in women's magazine and other publications.

Institutionalized women's groups came into existence after the start of the democracy era of 1932, and unlike many other developing countries, women's organizations in Thailand started long before World War II. Greater momentum in these activities was, however, gained during the UN's Decade of Women (1975–85) as it followed the period of the "democracy boom" (1973–76) in Thailand. During this period the students' movement superseded the military dictatorship, and the protests of students, farmers, and factory workers demanding justice and a greater share in development processes resounded and thrived. Since that time, several women activists and social workers have felt an inadequacy in the government's current views and approaches to the issue of women's development. One issue increasingly being vocalized is the decreasing number of women in agriculture and their increasing rural out-migration. Women join and outnumber men in migrating to Bangkok and even travel overseas to earn money as maids or prostitutes. Women activists and leaders have been working to demonstrate alternative strategies of education and training to improve the lot of their disadvantaged sisters.
Case Studies

To gain insight into the issues of women in development and the role of women's organizations in Thailand, case studies of five well-established women NGOs were undertaken. The criteria for the selection of the NGOs included the relevance of their programmes to women's causes such as economic welfare, political rights, and vocational training. The selected women NGOs were chosen to reflect the spectrum of both old and new groups, and a diversity of perceptions and approaches to women's problems. The five groups are:

1. National Council of Women of Thailand (NCWT)
2. Girl Guides Association of Thailand (GGAT);
3. Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW);
4. Friends of Women Group (FOW), and
5. Women's Information Centre (WIC).

To complete the list of major representative groups and to help generalize the findings from these five case studies, brief studies of three other important groups were also undertaken. Those groups are:

1. Committee on Women's Welfare Promotion (CWWP)
2. Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation (EMPOWER)
3. Hotline.

The study concerns itself with women's development in Thailand as seen through the contributions of women NGOs. The objectives of the study are not only to present an overview of the work done by selected women NGOs but also to analyse them for an in-depth understanding of the social significance of their programmes and experiences. Such analyses may help explain factors affecting women's actions and organizations in the Thai context, and identify desirable approaches and policies for advancing the status and role of Thai women.

We hope that this study will offer theoretical and historical insights into the needs and priorities of Thai women and lead to further discussion and dialogue on the role of women NGOs. We also hope that the research observations will be useful not only to women activists and academics but also to development planners in Thailand and in Southeast Asia.

Methodology

In order to study contemporary phenomena in real life, and to find out how various women NGOs have evolved and have been functioning, a qualitative, case study approach, both exploratory and descriptive, was used.
To describe and interpret the types and interests of women's groups, the use of qualitative research methods was appropriate. But while conducting the study, we realized that there existed elements of conflict in the actions of the community groups under study. Women's groups presented some opposition to the state as well as to males. They were also sometimes in conflict with each other. Fearing that the respondents might not develop enough trust and objectivity for valid qualitative work, we merged the qualitative method with an investigative one (Sanders and Pinhey 1983). Qualitative research involved observations, interviews and obtaining information from multiple sources. Investigating research extended this by taking into account the conflict laden nature of the research—the tendency of some informants to lie or stonewall (Douglas 1976), and the problems of stereotyping and exaggeration by those who advocated a particular vision. To overcome such biases, we designed a study rigid enough to have internal causal consistency, and external cross check validity, and yet flexible enough to leave room for later modification in data collection and analysis (Yin 1984).

The study is based on six months of field work in Thailand in 1985 and two return visits of three months each in 1986 and 1988. During this period, we visited various projects of selected women's groups in order to gain experience first hand. Whenever possible, we had an informal interview with both the planners and beneficiaries. In all cases, we tried to discuss at length with key persons in each organization, and to check their statements with those of other activists, workers and observers. In some cases, we were able to participate in seminars organized by women NGOs.

Since the research was dependent on openness in interaction in order to obtain reliable information, it was crucial to locate knowledgeable and trustworthy persons. We used different types of contacts and networks in order to establish friendly relations and to obtain independent confirmation of data collected. Making a new contact often resulted in new information and led to other informants. It was productive not only in collecting data but also to us personally as it gave us greater awareness, sensitivity and understanding of women's problems and what the everyday life experiences meant for the people involved.

Other sources of data were documents from each group and publications of the government and academic studies in both Thai and English. In addition, library sources were consulted, newspapers clippings utilized, and women formally active in women's organizations were contacted. We collected two kinds of data on Thai women: first, pertaining to socially determined roles and status of women, i.e. how the structure of the state, religion, and the kinship system have defined women's positions inside and outside the family, and how modernization has affected their life opportunities (Tantiwiramanond
and Pandey 1987; Pandey and Tantiwiramanond 1989). Second, pertaining to the growth of women's organizations, i.e. what Thai women have done to counteract their deteriorating situation. While conducting case studies, we looked at women's organizations as providers and recipients of development services. We also investigated the organizational structures of these groups to find out how certain structures either facilitated or impeded personal growth and group-goal attainment. While collecting this information, most discussions and interviews were first tape-recorded in Thai language, then transcribed, and finally translated into English. The combined text of all interviews totalled 300 pages. The contents of many interviews are assimilated in this analysis and some are utilized as direct quotations. Because of the structure of the Thai language, it was difficult to remain true to the original tone and style of the informants. The quoted interviews have been mildly edited.

Theoretical Concerns

Recent social science literature has suggested a number of ways to explore the phenomena of collective action. North American literature often cite three approaches: structural, psychological, and resource-mobilization. European social scientists have developed a view of "new social movements". The insights from both American and European paradigms can be useful for understanding the emergence and growth of Thai women NGOs.

Structural theory deals with objectives and macro situations in a society, and suggests that social disequilibrium and strains are often a prerequisite for the growth of collective action (Johnson 1966). The psychological approach in contrast rests on a subjective sense of deprivation (Gurr 1970). Both are helpful in understanding social or personal causes in starting a social action, but they do not fully help in understanding what sustains it. Resource-mobilization theory, based on interactions between government and groups and the mobilization of resources including leadership, provides some insights into acquiring and sustaining political opportunities for a collective goal (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1973; 1977). Within the framework of resource-mobilization theory, our study inquires into the causes of participation, contribution of organization, and possibility of success as key factors for collective action.

In contrast to these considerations, the perspective of the "new social movement" is based on the perception of young people about the failure of modernization and the welfare state (Frank and Fuentev 1988; Melucci 1980). This approach gives importance to emerging new values and actions in society, and compensates for the lack of "why" or attention to structural preconditions in the resource-mobilization paradigm. To understand the emergence of young and radical groups, it is especially useful to ask: what is new about the progressive
groups, and how do they come about? Could the rise of these groups be understood as new social movements? What are their new values, actions and constituencies? Are they rooted in reaction to modernization that clashes with traditional dignity and freedom?

While utilizing insights from the resource-mobilization and new social movement perspectives, we do not want to lose sight of our central concern—the patriarchy. Patriarchal relations have their own history independent of mobilization. For a theory of patriarchal power and patriarchal economics, we use the concept of patriarchal state (Connell 1987). We are interested in understanding the government's responses to organizations. When groups try to work with government to receive resources, it is important to know what is the relationship of the state to patriarchal relations, and how the relations of the state to capital, industry or business are similar to, or different from, its relations to patriarchy. How the government, which is largely male and interested in maintaining patriarchal relations, considers what is legitimate, what it funds, and who populates the government.

A government may not be receptive to the needs of the disadvantaged in a society, and in fact may indeed exacerbate the situation. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerge to address this lack, but they exist only when permitted by the government. It is, therefore, instructive to study the links of these NGOs with the government, and how these NGOs use "organizations as a resource".

Élite groups often recognize the disequilibrium and strains in society first, and then react to it. It is, therefore, not a surprise that leaders of most women NGOs are élite women. The élite women have both negative (preserving the status quo) and positive (mobilization for progressive strength) potential. How élite women mobilized their "class resources" or "social capital", and how gender issues relate to class issues are questions this study explores.

With a theoretical framework that combines the resource-mobilization and new social movement perspectives, we are interested in investigating how these women's groups mobilize people and resources through their strategies, ideologies and structures, and how welfare-oriented élite groups differ from the newer and younger women-sensitive social movement groups. Their links with the state, and the interaction of class and gender issues within their actions also acquire a natural importance in our analytical considerations.

The overall framework of the study is interdisciplinary and centred around women in a development perspective. This perspective recognizes that development processes are not class or gender neutral, and the issues of justice and inequality are both gender specific and development oriented. The study is women-centred in two ways. First, it makes women the centre of the inquiry by asking: how does life appear to them? Second, it is critical on their behalf by
asking: how can society be made more humane for both women and men? No adherence to a particular academic discipline or scientific neutrality of observation is claimed. Many of the observations are subjective and reflective of our current understanding. The goal, however, is to participate in the dialogue and actions to improve the life-opportunities of Thai women.

Organization of the Study

While discussing the problem of Thai women and presenting case studies of Thai women's groups in subsequent chapters, we have used several guidelines for the use of Thai words, quotes of interviews and defining feminist categories. In keeping with the Thai custom, we often use honorific titles before people's names. For the spelling of Thai words, popular spelling as used by the person or groups is often utilized, in contrast to using a standard phonetic dictionary such as that of the Royal Institute. English equivalents are usually given after Thai words. A group, however, may have an independent English name that may not coincide with the English translation of its name. While quoting an interview, the name of the speaker is usually not stated. Instead, an identification of the speaker is made indirectly.

In Western society the word "feminism" sometimes connotes a strong "anti-male" attitude. It often gets conflated with lesbianism. Because of this impression of confrontation (male-hatred), or individual pursuits (often related to "bra-burning, free sex"), the word "feminist" is often disliked (frowned upon) or explained differently in the Third World specifically in Thailand. There is no feminist movement in Thailand as a unified theory. Those using it assign levels of meaning to it: welfare, autonomy, choice and justice. Compared to the categories of feminism in the West—conservative, liberal, Marxist, socialist and radical—there is no similar category in Thailand. Suppressed by the anti-Communism policy of the government, socialist, Marxist and radical groups hardly exist in the open. What is prevalent, however, are the three main categories: conservative (nationalist), liberal (individual rights), and progressive (collective welfare) groups. Conservative groups, emphasizing the home-bound, nurturing role of the women, are sometimes called "classical" groups, and progressive groups, speaking about violence against women such as forced prostitution and rape, are called "new generation groups". Progressive groups are sometimes labelled as "radical" because any vocalization of "right" or "justice" is "leftist" enough to be regarded as "radical".

This study of women NGOs is arranged in nine chapters. Chapter II provides a background on problems of Thai women in the contexts of culture and political economy. Chapter III shows an historical evolution of women's participation (in various organized activities) in Thai society, and the parallel