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**Expert Group Meeting on**  
**Equal participation of women and men in**  
**decision-making processes, with particular**  
**emphasis on political participation and leadership**  
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**Thai-Buddhist Leadership and Muslim Grassroots Women**  
**in the Game of 'Terrorism' War :**  
**The Unrest Southern Thailand Crisis\***

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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## **Introduction**

Deeply entrenched barriers exclude women throughout the world from meaningful participation in socio-economic and political activities. This is not merely an issue of fairness and equality. It has been argued that by expanding women's opportunities, participation, and representation in political structure and leadership, society as a whole would simultaneously be strengthened and this would enhance broader development prospects in the long run.

For years, I have made my sojourn for truth as a part of my responsibility committed to gender equality and cultural survival. My presentation today will have a specific political standpoint. I propose that we, either male or female, can perceive the world and view our own community, country and region, and global conflicts through the lenses of world politics and human values in gender perspectives. As we are all sensitive towards human life, and the right to live equally is our hope and values, our views towards human conflict, global tension, and world chaos can be universal. Human, community, and indigenous rights are our great concern, women and children's rights are our vital breath, and the rights of others to live in peace are our own life.

It is from this humanistic position and political stance that I speak.

In this United Nations' Expert Group Meeting on equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership, I hope that the information, analysis, and argument I am sharing with you all will gain benefit to both women and men in all parts of the world, particularly those who are in the war front and victimized by the world conflict and global tension at present.

In my paper, I am also sharing with you the true stories and life-experiences of some women in my country who are trying their best to solve the crises in the contexts of their own perception of social history.

I hope that through these women's participation, representations, roles and activities, including their struggles to overcome various obstacles, you will be able to observe women's political participation and their leadership in the context of current political situation of Thailand.

### **1. Historical Background and Commitment**

Recently, a wide variety of international initiatives have been developed to expand women's opportunities. This study examines the potential of women in Thailand in order to understand their opportunities and empowerment in the context of United Nations.

According to Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which recognizes the right of every person to take part in the government of his or her country, equal access of men and women to power, decision-making and leadership at all levels is a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of democracy. Also equal participation of men and women in political affairs would enhance governments to be more representative of the composition of society, as well as make them more accountable and transparent. However women have been excluded from power and decision-making processes, it is hoped that this global social movement will ensure the interests of women at all levels in every part of the world. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life, including the right to vote and to stand for election, as well as to hold public office at all levels of government (Article 7). States parties agree to take all appropriate measures to overcome historical discrimination against women and obstacles to women's participation in decision-making processes (Article 8), including legislation and temporary special measures (Article 4).

Thailand had a report to implement Article 40 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 of the United Nations. It deals with the legislative, administrative and judicial process that serve to efficiently implement various provisions of the Covenant and to be in accordance to the spirit of the Covenant. The Thai government officially declared to the United Nations that,

“Thailand has become a party to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 without making any reservations and is legally bound by it since 29 January 1977. Thailand has considered and found that under the present political legal and governmental system of Thailand, it can follow the Covenant without any obstacle.”

CCPR/C/THA/2004/1, 2 August 2004.

## **2. On the Road to Gender Equality**

Over three decades ago, Thailand began its journey toward freedom when people sacrificed their lives to oppose a dictatorship and demand democracy. However there are still larger problems facing Thailand: problems of unequal political rights, unequal economic distribution, and a 'democracy of interests', all leading to human and community rights violations while threatening the traditional Buddhist way of life. Thailand needs to develop the ability to compete in the global economy, while preserving the rights of its people – essentially, a true, working democracy, free of the rampant

corruption, human rights violations, and ethnic discrimination that exist today. Along this journey, women's space has occurred in various forms.

The Thai Constitution of 1997 is of special interest for the women's liberation movement as generating equality has been one of its central goals. Under Thai Law men and women are regarded on equal terms. In Article 80 the state commits itself to promote gender equality. One third of the Extraordinary House Committee has to be constituted by women's organizations when women issues are on the agenda (Article 90). Therefore at the local elections on June 10, 2000, women made up 8.4 per cent of the representatives voted into parliament, an increase of 2 per cent from the year before. This improvement is already considered to be the first success of the new constitution. Moreover, at the Bangkok Governor's elections on July 23, 2000, women ran for the office of Bangkok governor for the first time. While none of the women were elected, the fact that they were actually running for office was already considered a success. However, women are still strikingly under-represented on all political levels. Their representation in the Lower House amounts to a mere 4.8 per cent. (Thonguthai and Putananusorn 2004)

Women's labor employment rates are only slightly lower than men's employment (96.7 per cent for men and 95.4 per cent for women). Despite the general improvements since the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997, the economic situation of women is still more difficult than that of men. They constitute the majority of the jobless and many of them are still forced to work in the informal sector without any kind of social insurance or benefits. Although the government's awareness concerning the informal sector issue has undoubtedly increased, no considerable successes have been achieved. Membership in labor unions and federations in the Thai public and private sector shows that where the membership is composed of both women and men, men still outnumber women in terms of participation. (Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare 1988 and 2003) Among 839 labor unions in 1993, men accounted for 60% of the total numbers. (Thai National Commission on Women's Affairs 1994) In 2003, out of 1,066 executive officers of state enterprises' unions, there were only 138 women (12%) while in the private sector's unions there were 4,143 women out of 12,215 executive officers (33.39%). (Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development 2003)

Women's access to educational institutions is comparatively good. However, there are still wide gaps between young men and women concerning graduate education. Male enrollment is considerably higher than female enrollment (12.8 per cent for women compared to 17.3 per cent for men). Women also have a higher illiteracy rate (11.5 per cent) than men (7.3 per cent). In educational Institution, women far outnumber men in the lower level but the situation is completely reversed further up the ladder. In state universities, women's share for the position of Dean was only 5% in 1996, and 4.76% in 2001. However, there was a slight progress for the position of deputy dean where women's share had risen from 20.13% in 1996 to 25.55% in 2001. (Report on Government Workforce, Office of Civil Service Commission, 2001)

In rural areas, during the past ten years, women's share in most co-operatives increased 2-8 times. Women's participation as executive committee in co-operatives has risen from 1993 to 2004 quite satisfactory, i.e., in land settlement co-operatives - from 3% to 24%; in agricultural co-operatives – from 3% to 12%; in fishery co-operatives – from 8% to 26%; in saving co-operatives – from 15% to 28%; in service co-operatives – from 8% to 19%; except in grocery co-operatives – from 20% in 1993 to 9% in 2004 [Average 9% in 1993 to 17% in 2004]. (Department of Co-operatives Promotion, 1993 and 2004)

In political realm, from 1995-2001 saw women's increased political participation at both national and local levels. For national politics, there has been an increase in number of women candidates for the Lower House as well as in the National Parliament. However women's chance of having their names submitted as national candidates is quite small and the chance to be elected is even smaller. There has been a remarkable trend from 1988 onward for women getting seats in the National Parliament. The percentage of women elected gradually increased from 2.8% to 6.14% and 9.20% in 1988, 1995 and 2001 respectively. (Thonguthai and Putananusorn 2004)

Since 1997, the new Thai Constitution has provided new opportunities for women to be submitted in a list of candidates for direct parliamentary election, and each party is required to also propose a 'party list' of up to 100 persons, as being proportional to the number of candidates from each party who are successfully elected. According to this national process, among 37 parties taking part in the most recent election in 2005 [February 6, 2005], 147 women whose names were placed on the party list accounted for 18.15% of the total, but only eight of them went on to become Members of Parliament in the 'party list' category. It may be read that the low number reflected the fact that most political parties put women's names way down the list, only a few women could gain their place among the top ten because of their personal high profile among the male candidates.

As for the Senate, the first two women senators were appointed in 1949; within this year, first woman was coincidentally elected to the Parliament. The last appointment of senators was made in 1996. Women's representation in the Senate was still very small, ranging from 1% in 1949 to 9% in the period between 1949-1996. It was in 2000 under the 1997 Constitution that senators were directly elected for the first time. Among 115 women candidates, only 20 women were elected, marking their representation in the senate at 10%, which is by far the highest. (Office of Election Commission and Ministry of Interior 2003)

In local politics and administration, there has been a good sign, but with very little improvement and low percentage, women's participation as members of provincial council increased from 4.9% to 6.9% between 1995-2002; and at the village level, women's share in sub-district head increased from 1.79% to 2.1%. However, in comparison, women's share in local government of Bangkok was higher. In the latest election of Bangkok Metropolitan Council and its district councils, such percentages

increased to 16.7% and 11.9 % respectively. (Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development 2003)

It was in July 1995 that the first policy statement of the Thai government included issues of women in power and decision-making, about two months before the Beijing Conference, marking the increasing awareness of the Thai Government and political bodies concerned on gender issues.

Since 1997, Chuan Leekpai government stated, "...to promote gender equality by amending laws, regulations and rules to provide the opportunity for omen 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...".

In 2001, Thaksin government [1] further stated, "...aim to promote women's rights, role and status, develop women's capability to enable them to fully participate in community development...in terms of economic, social and political rights, ...including the promotion of gender equality in governmental service sectors..."

Although no clear affirmative action to promote women's participation in high level governmental bodies, strenuous efforts have been pushed by NGO networking in the direction to insist the cabinet to consider equitable appointment of women in national committees where major decisions could be made. Therefore in accordance with the 1997 Constitution and the subsequent efforts of various groups of NGO to create awareness in having equal representation, a few high profile national committees have some seats for women, particularly the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has roughly equal number of men and women [6 men : 5 women], but still it is chaired by a senior male member.

To sum up, one may say that in Thailand there is new awareness of gender issues, even though the number of women in leading positions remains unacceptably low. Thailand has also a relatively strong women's liberation movement of various types but this should be elaborated in other occasion in a separate paper. There is also a small number of academic structures which try to promote democratic development by encouraging women's political participation, supporting women to take part in decision making at all levels, and reducing the gender gap in parliament and political bodies, but the accomplishment is far beyond success.

### **3. Another Side of the Coin**

Thailand is known by its own people and throughout the world as a predominantly Buddhist state. Yet despite the prevalence of Buddhism, Thailand is also a tourist hub that sells its culture and sex. Modern economic experts on Thailand attempt to explain this paradox by attributing Thailand's ever-growing sex industry to a gender-based division of labor. They argue that this division has made women more vulnerable to economic turmoil. Some anthropologists observe, however, that this division of labor itself may also be influenced greatly by the predominant belief system and affirm the connection between Buddhism, Animism, and prostitution. Either way, any study of

gender roles in Thailand could not ignore the high incidence of prostitution within this predominantly Buddhist nation. (Kwan-Isara Chatvanichkul 2005)

It has been noted by anthropologists and feminists alike that there are very few Thai women in bureaucratic positions. Most women in Thai society seem to be confined to agriculture and trade. In rural areas where women played a significant role in agriculture, women also controlled the family finances (Nantanee 1977). Because women were tied to agricultural and trade occupations, they often received little or no education. The globalization and liberalization of trade has led to low wages in these sectors, forcing women to “take second employment” in order to fulfill their family obligations. Sex work has become a viable option since the sex industry can absorb women without limit” (Skrobanek 2000). Although in the past, prostitution in Thailand may have been fostered by the Buddhist image of women as the “temptress” (Kirsch 1985), the high incidence of prostitution at present is likely due more to economic factors - specifically, the ramifications of a gender-based division of labor.

According to my research findings, in the four regions of Thailand, it is the women who control household budget, and make decisions as to how to manage and distribute it. In northern and northeastern Thailand, traditionally, women are still inheritors when it comes to land rights, which include the family's property, granary and livestock (Satyawadhna et al. 2004). Female control over family finances reflects important characteristics of Thai and indigenous cultures - specifically, the matrilineal social structure and belief system in both Thai and former Mon-Khmer speaking groups, such as the Muang, the Lua, (Lwa), and aboriginal Lawa ethnicities before they were assimilated (Satyawadhna 2000). The matrilineal skewing is reflective of a belief system that predates both Islam and Buddhism in Thailand - Animism. Thai and former Mon-Khmer animists believe that the matrilineal spirits are present and watch over in the household; thus, the house must be kept in the maternal line. These female spirits required men to pay a fee for "touching" an unmarried daughter in their home - a belief that led to the Thai practice of bride-price - and forced men to leave the house or land in case of divorce (Mueke 1984). Since women were “tied to the land”, they were prevented from entering other occupations. Female ownership of the land led to the ownership of the produce and involvement in trade. Since men technically did not own anything, they were forced to find their wealth elsewhere, as hired hands and later, as bureaucrats.

Although female employment levels have increased, working conditions, wages, job security, and safety have, in many cases, been deteriorating. There are still several basic problems caused by the present-day male-dominated culture and ideology. One is the attitude towards female roles and the concept of gender power relations among the general public; another is many women's perception of political activities as “unclean and power-seeking” (Thai Women in Local Politics: Democracy in the Making, 1997). Although Thai women today are more visible in parliamentary politics at the state level, they still lack access to the ‘modern’ and ‘westernized’ power structures that shape society. Due to deteriorating economic conditions and drastic changes in cultural values, the goals of gender equality, community development, and national peace cannot be achieved without women's active participation in decision-making.



Nevertheless, in times of crisis, and on the basis of such eco-socio-cultural background, certain Thai women have empowered themselves and their society, and responded with grace, strength, courage, and dignity.

#### **4. Women in war and peace**

Policy makers, practitioners, and academics have discussed long-running conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe and highlight the shared experiences of women, and their potential to contribute both to war and particularly to peace. They consider why women's concerns have yet to be placed at the forefront of both analysis and practical outcomes. My study is an attempt of a feminist-humanistic approach to open the floor for women's participation and representation for peace building and conflict resolution in order to put forward concrete policy to achieve these ends. Further study, elaboration of more case-studies and discussions among the experts are required. I argue for the need to move beyond the superficial stereotypes of Muslim women, as an 'passive' agent to an 'active' one, which I perceive that it has been an outcome from day-to-day's violence, resulted in the exposure and promotion of the underlying women's power to the functions and dynamics of social change in the local, regional, and international Muslim communities. Much has been written about women's suffering in times of war. In general, women's positioning at times of war are usually perceived as being at the home front or that women are always victims in times of conflict. I argue that such perception is simplistic and that at times the terminology used to define conflict, war and the war front are misleading. It may also be interpreted that conflicts can both empower and disempower women, since women can be at the same time included and excluded in practice. (Haleh Afshar and Deborah Eade, 2004)

I fully support the idea that women may be both victims and agents of change in time of war, stated by the co-authors, Afshar and Eade, as women may be fighters as well as be attacked and raped. While in critical period of war and conflict, they may choose to provide back-up support and yet simultaneously find themselves and their homes in the war front. Ancient myth and world history evidently showed that women might be caught in transgressions – intermarriages, bridging towards peace but only to have become causes of hatred, revenge, and war. Through their tormented hardships, women could develop their visions of peace that are deep-rooted in their childhood's memory, either happiness or sufferings. Peace building processes, be it at local, national, or international levels, in the shared historical heritage of SEA, usually include the perspectives, choices, and directions that many women had made at times of war.

But finally, women were expected to abandon any positions of responsibility and authority they could be able to have achieved when the men were at war and then women would be expected to go back to the domestic realm when peace occurred. The Indo-China and Vietnam post-war period saw the violence, fear, and domination which either the winners or losers brought home, while their women were usually expected to bear and cure the pain and still remained silent and submissive in the name of peace and unity.

Today women's tasks became all the more difficult at times of war and unrest, as there are no longer war fronts as in the past, since homes, schools, hospitals, public highways, and even personal relationships might be part of the arena of warfare. Nevertheless, men and women who married or have had marriage life across the political conflict, usually found themselves torn by the subsequent conflicts in between the invisible boundaries of faith, love, and hate, including distinctive ethnic identities and boundaries. This tormented feeling has already happened to several couples and among families who have had intermarriage between Thai and Muslim in Southern Thailand, resulted in the break, uncertainty, and insecurity in marriage life, including confusion and repression among their children. Mothers who could not break away from the constraints place upon them have become the most tolerant persons in the family to handle and manage the conflicting situation and would usually try their best to solve or soften the crisis across ethnic boundaries, religious or regional identities.

On the other way round, the need to cope with conflict make women more independent, more effective, more flexible, and empower themselves to become active agents of their family, community, and their society at large. It can be witnessed with one's own eyes that, through conflicts, crisis, and war, women's emphasis on motherhood and domesticity remains unchanged and being central to the survival of the entire family and community. At such times women may be able to exercise their power and have more control over men. Nevertheless, in the context of Thailand and SEA, motherhood and maternal roles are often symbolically transformed further into the feelings of patriotism and nationalism.

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