WOMEN AND MEN

Moving towards a Partnership of Equals in Development

by

Maytinee Bhongsvej

Gender and Development Research Institute
Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women
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Gender inequality has become a global concern. Experiences have clearly shown that success of development programs, to a great extent, is based on how well different roles, needs, expectations of women and men are addressed.

The United Nations, the World Bank and many other development agencies have well recognized that gender equality is a core development issue—a development objective in its own right. Recent World Bank research has provided evidence that greater gender equality “strengthens countries’ ability to grow, to reduce poverty and to govern effectively. Promoting gender equality is thus an important part of a development strategy that seeks to enable all people—women and men alike—to escape poverty and improve their standard of living.” (World Bank, 2000)

The past few decades have seen a greater awareness in Thai society of the need for gender equality. This is reflected in the Constitution and in some of the government policies and practices. For women, progress has been achieved in many areas, such as education and health. However, sex discrimination can still be found in families, communities and in society as a whole. Deep-rooted patriarchal values and attitudes still persist and definitely more gender awareness-raising effort is needed.

This booklet is part of a series of a World Bank Thailand initiative to “listen to people’s stories” to broaden our understanding of gender issues.

On behalf of the Gender and Development Research Institute, we would like to thank Karen Emmons for her great contribution in interviewing the selected leading women and men whose “stories” formed the backbone of this document. Our deep gratitude goes to all these interviewers who gave us opportunities to learn from their insights and experiences. We also highly appreciate the effort of Maytinee Bhongsvej who has complied all the “stories” and gender issues, thereby elucidating the scenario of gender equality in Thailand.

We would also like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the World Bank for their insightful recognition of the significance of heightening gender awareness, paving the way towards gender equality in the Thai society. The financial support that has been generously given has made both the production of this report and its distribution possible.

Suteera Vichitranonda, Ph.D.
President
Gender and Development Research Institute Foundation
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INTRODUCTION

Few people would disagree that males and females experience life differently, largely because of the different socialization processes that they have undergone. They have different jobs inside and outside the home. They have differing cultural expectations placed on them at different stages of their lives. They use natural resources differently. They tend to spend money differently. They usually have different health problems. They certainly experience poverty differently. Development also has a different impact on men and women and they benefit differently from development programs. Most of these differences have been found to put women in a more disadvantaged position.

Experiences have shown that socio-economic, cultural and political environments favour men’s participation over women’s in various development spheres. Women are generally perceived as passive beneficiaries, invisible in the development process. Their needs and interests are not adequately addressed.

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach is based on the assumption that women and men should equally contribute to and benefit from the development. It highlights the unequal relations between men and women.

The term “gender” as an analytical tool emerged from an awareness of such inequalities. It focuses not on women as an isolated and homogeneous group, but on the roles and needs of both men and women. The approach requires inputs from both sides in order to achieve greater equality between them.

One core issue that GAD addresses is the interplay between the productive and reproductive labour division. This division establishes parameters on how women and men participate in and benefit from development. Dominated by men, productive activities are more highly paid and valued. Social reproduction, including caring activities, is regarded as the responsibility of women. This sphere of responsibility is often taken for granted and undervalued. Due to the view of reproductive activities as less significant, development work tends to focus on economic production that largely addresses men’s concerns and assumes that the results will benefit both men and women. Often, as the gap widens in terms of opportunities and capacity between men and women, so does women’s growing insecurity and powerlessness.

The objective is to advance the position of women in society with gender equality as the ultimate goal.

The strategy is gender mainstreaming, adopted at United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

This strategy goes beyond increasing women’s participation. Gender mainstreaming brings the experience, knowledge, needs and interests of women and men to bear.
on the development agenda. It may require changes in goals, strategies and action so that all persons can influence, participate in and benefit from development processes. The goal of mainstreaming gender equality is thus the transformation of unequal social and institutional structures into equal and just structures for both men and women. (ILO, 2000)

There is still a great need for full understanding among policymakers and development planners that gender is key among development issues. Moreover, if, as the government has suggested, poverty is the priority problem to be tackled, then the linkages between poverty and gender must be quickly and firmly established.

**THIS BOOKLET**

This booklet is not intended to be a textbook. It is an informal “progress report” based on anecdotal experiences and personal views of various Thai people about gender and development issues in Thailand. It includes stories about how gender affects development and how development impacts men and women differently. It also demonstrates that empowerment of women clearly benefits families and communities.

Section I on *Gender Awareness* looks at the experiences of Thai people in understanding gender and how, ultimately, they become convinced that integrating a gender perspective in projects renders more effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.

There are many areas in Thai society where inequalities still exist. Those gender disparities are obvious in four general areas – opportunity, capacity, security and empowerment. The World Bank has highlighted these dimensions and suggests how development can benefit men and women equitably if these dimensions are taken into account. Some of the prevailing gaps in Thailand, as they fall into these areas, are highlighted in Section II on *Gender Gaps*.

Much effort has been made over the years to minimize these gaps. There have been some successes but many challenges, including changes in long held traditions and expectations, still lie ahead. Section III, *Moving Toward Gender Equality*, highlights discussions with leading women and men on how to better use government mechanisms for promoting gender equality.

Throughout this document, a stronger emphasis has been placed on women in development. The point is not to overlook men, but to address the reality that women are at a more disadvantaged position in society. In this booklet’s many conversations, Thai women repeatedly expressed the need to work with men on equal terms to move the country forward. Women find it necessary to be involved in charting the direction of development as it affects their lives, their communities and the whole society. Assisting them in attaining that level of participation is an important part of development process.

Gender relations are complex and can be easily overlooked, reinforcing the inequalities that exist. This booklet aims, in a non-academic way, to familiarize the reader with the concepts and ideas of gender development and to underline the need for everyone to join together in the quest for gender equality in society.
SECTION I
UNWRAPPING GENDER

UNDERSTANDING GENDER

“I could never imagine the degree of problems women face – I had never been discriminated against, I had never been sexually harassed,” admits Pusadee Tamthai, a gender equality advocate. It was not until she joined the Women in Politics Institute, and later the Women and Constitution Network, that she could see more clearly the gender issues and the extent of obstacles affecting people in Thailand.

Similar remarks are commonly found among women, particularly those who have made many achievements in their careers. Many women feel they should be held to the same standards as men to be considered for advancement, and that special measures are not required. As for men, upon hearing about some disadvantages women face, most tend to disagree, contending that women and men are equal. “My wife has a bigger say in the family” is often heard.

If we are not exposed to other people’s lives, it is easy to assume we all share common experiences. As groups, women and men have been exposed to different socialization processes. Their life experiences are different, shaped and determined by the society. And these begin at birth.

When a child is born, the first question asked is whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Even gifts, whether it is a toy or clothing, are chosen differently – blue for boys and pink for girls. How one learns to be a woman or a man begins at birth as families have different expectations for boys and girls. In effect, sons and daughters go through different processes of socialization.

The different moulds persist throughout life in the social institutions through which men and women pass. Although this process begins with the family, the reinforcement is also easily seen in schools, work places and the society at large.

Gender awareness is about being able to see these differences between men and women and how they further affect our thought patterns and value systems.

With an open mind, reflections on the social differences between men and women can lead to a better understanding of how unintentional assumptions or simple unawareness, as well as stereotyped roles of men and women, create obstacles, limit opportunities, and impede productivity and security.

Gender is a rather new concept. The fact that it does not have a direct translation in Thai hampers the recognition of gender as a significant development variable.

Gender refers to differences in the social roles and responsibilities of women and men, to the social behaviours and characteristics considered to be appropriate for them, and to ideas about how these should be valued and
rewarded. Gender thus represents common ideas in the particular society and culture about what is appropriate and ‘usual’ for a particular sex group.

Contrary to ‘sex’, which refers to biological attributes that are fixed at birth, gender is a social construct and is changeable. Yet many times, many people use the words interchangeably, which leads to further misunderstanding and unawareness.

The division of roles and responsibilities for men and women has been rather rigid. As such, women are perceived to be the party primarily responsible for bringing up children and looking after the family’s well being. Women’s central place is in the house while men are assumed to be the leader and breadwinner, taking an active role in the public sphere.

Differences in responsibilities and roles have some bearing on personal characteristics and shape the differential behaviours of boys and girls, men and women. They also develop different needs, interests and skills.

Women are thus stereotypically seen to be sensitive, weak, submissive, particular in details and service-minded, while men are equated with such qualities as rationality, decisiveness, strength and leadership. These stereotypes form a solid foundation and are often mistakenly perceived as innate or natural traits.

Furthermore, these differential roles, responsibilities, characteristics and behaviours are differently valued and rewarded by the society.

Box 1: Men are leaders
Wijtra Chunakul of the NET Foundation winces when describing her NGO work of a decade ago. “We were promoting alternative, non-chemical crops,” she recalls. “We went to villages in several provinces and asked to speak with their leaders. The meeting rooms were full of men. We thought this was natural.” She pauses as she smiles with embarrassment at her own former role in perpetuating the invisibility of women’s roles.

These stereotypes are firmly established in the mindset of men and women, and take a longer time to change than the roles of men and women, which have been changing at a much faster rate.

Hence, one finds that the traditional view of men as the protector, leader and breadwinner, and women the follower and homemaker is still pervasive despite the fact that many women now have jobs outside the home and are active in the public arena.

Gender Awareness: The Missing Part in Development Programs

With women’s primary roles stereotypically regarded as homemakers and men as breadwinners, many development interventions have neither involved women nor taken women’s lifestyles, needs and interests into consideration. Women are invisible in the mainstream development processes. The consequence is that many development projects have not been responsive to the needs and interests of women. Many of these have
failed. In many situations, benefits to be derived from the development effort are assumed to trickle down from men to women. But in reality, this process does not occur, resulting in an inequitable share between men and women. Lack of gender awareness has thus proved an impediment to development.

Gender unawareness has resulted in numerous examples of women being overlooked in development interventions.

**Box 2: Invisibility Of Women**

Chuensuk Arsaithamkul, project coordinator of the Gender and Development Working Groups, sharing her observation on invisibility of women by some of the NGOs working with the hilltribe where the tradition of women tending the livestock has been ignored. When they provide courses on new technologies in animal husbandry, they take only men to train. The timing of some workshops is inconvenient for women. The Thai language also proves a major barrier to many hilltribe women who only speak their ethnic language. “When women speak, some translators—often men—do not want to translate exactly what the women say. They do not think the ideas of women are appropriate” Chuensuk explains.

Another example is given by Kingkorn Narintarakul Na Ayudhaya and her colleagues at the Northern Development Foundation who worked on the land rights and livelihood of the hilltribes people. “We organized the meetings at times that made it difficult for women to fully participate. The women came when they had finished their housework or had to leave early to go back home. We didn’t pay attention to involve women as much as we could,” says Kingkorn. “When we focused on specific land right issues, we used maps as the main tools for them to demarcate boundaries and categorize their use of the land,” says Kingkorn. She remembers women looking out of the window for something interesting. She asked only men to map the village’s use of the forest.

Similar experiences are cited by Wijitra Chunakul and her colleagues at the Surin-based NET Foundation. Upon finding that their integrated farming projects were not successful, they went back to the village leaders to ask what had gone wrong. Through discussions with women, the team realized that information provided only to village leaders, or to men attending workshops, is not necessarily passed on. Some men may not grasp the ideas well enough to be able to properly inform others; some may not care to share their new knowledge; or women who make farming decisions with their husbands may not readily accept what the men tell them.

“It was a very big mistake and it was our fault: we used the participatory approach but not specifically to each group.”
In Thailand, as elsewhere, a recognition of women’s key position in the development process fostered earlier efforts to integrate women. Viewed as important and useful resources, women were seen to render projects more efficient and successful. The approach adopted was called Women in Development (WID). However, there were some shortcomings with the WID approach as it addressed only the involvement of women, but did not touch on the relations between men and women. In addition, as the projects considered women to be productive agents in the development processes, women’s involvement in many development projects had resulted in women handling the triple load of productive, reproductive and community activities. The budget allocated to WID projects was also very minimal.

With the limitations of WID projects, the growing trend has begun to regard women as agents and beneficiaries in all stages of development processes. It is through the understanding of gender that this Gender and Development (GAD) approach has emerged.

The GAD approach looks at both men and women, their respective roles, interests and needs in the development processes. However, in development processes, one not only finds that development affects men and women differently, but that women and men also impact development differently. Development priorities are very often different between men and women due to their different roles and responsibilities. Hence, when women and men are not equally represented in development planning and the needs and interests of women are not addressed, the results of such planning may render a disadvantaged position for women.

**Box 3: Men and women impact development differently**

In the village councils, where there are few women members, little attention is given to the demands made by women. Such issues involve security and safety, income generation, health care, child-care centers or projects that help to lighten their child-care responsibilities, explains gender analyst, Ruengrawee Pichaikul Ketphol, drawing on her experiences as a gender trainer. She says there is a pattern in budget spending by village councils that follows male stereotyped ideas of development: men seek to build roads to town because they are the ones who drive or transport products to the market while women want roads to the schools or temples their children attend. When men build dams, ponds or reservoirs, they overlook the needs of people who must gain access to them; they forget to build steps for those (usually females) who have to carry water for the family’s needs; or they neglect to install piped water to prevent women or children from having to carry water buckets over long distances.

Another example that Ruengrawee adds concerns one sub-district in which she provided gender training. Men and women agreed to establish an information center as a development priority. The men proposed building a library with books and newspapers, but the women wanted a community radio with a loudspeaker at the village intersection that relayed news for everyone to hear. Since it was impossible for women to spend 2-3 hours at the library reading the newspaper, the loudspeaker made it possible for them to listen to the news while they took care of their households and children.”
Increasing Gender Awareness Through Gender Training

Over the years, there has been some improvement in the understanding of gender and its implications for development. Through their projects, many NGOs have incorporated a gender perspective and launched gender awareness sessions with their project beneficiaries. Resistance, however, can still be felt. If gender training is organized, it is often regarded as an activity for women.

Box 4: Men’s perception of gender

“Men think gender is an imported Western idea.” says Poonsombat Namla of the Isaan Community Foundation. “Men think gender awareness will create conflicts between men and women. The male social structure in Thailand is strong”.

Some men, says Poonsombat, are not interested in the voice of women. Some tambon male members think the development of women is not suitable. “Men would say man and woman are one family and that the woman problem is not so big. Still, they would not listen to her.”

Poonsombat works with the Isaan Community Foundation, scattering NGO development activities throughout the region. “Development hasn’t been listening to people very well, but certainly less so, has it heard from women. He also recognizes a critical need to break down men’s gender unawareness. “Many women are interested in gender training and few men are. There is no difference in solving problems if men don’t participate. The goal cannot be achieved until they do.”

To draw men into gender discussions, the activities once intended to empower women should target both sexes. It is found that when men and women are involved in an activity together they better understand one another. When this occurs, recognition and acceptance more easily follow.

A training project organized by the Gender and Development Research Institute well illustrates the significance of having both men and women in the Tambon or Sub-district Administrative Organization (TAO) training. “I appreciate much more having both men and women working together for the community. Many talents and abilities that men lack can be compensated by women and vice versa.” That was a remark by a few male members of TAO who underwent training to improve the administrative skills of both male and female TAO members. Through these sessions, differences were discussed regarding male and female interests and needs, as well as skills and abilities in community development. Several female participants indicated that they were more confident in expressing their concerns in the presence of men after participating in the training (GDRI, 1998).

Gender Awareness Leads To Changes In Gender Relations

Through NGOs’ organized sessions, changes in gender relations have taken place. Male villagers better recognize the contribution women’s expertise can make to policymaking discussions with the government, and are insisting on more involvement in this contentious issue.
One NGO has also found that, through the projects, men are more open to female membership in their activities or in community politics because they believe the women to be better at resolving arguments. Women have learned to involve men in their work to help relieve some of their burdens, such as making product deliveries. Before the projects were launched, women would not ask for the right to participate or be a leader because it was not natural to them. Now they are becoming outspoken community members and have proved that they can lead in many project activities.

Gender training has also helped women demand more government resources and budget for projects of interest to them, particularly livelihood projects such as producing herbal shampoo. After working in development projects, several women have become role models for the program and have influenced other community members. There are also more reports of women seeking village leadership roles.

**Box 5: When Women’s Voices Are Heard**

*Krisana Kaewplang* tells a unique story about saving a forest, a project of WildAid Foundation (Thailand), where she works as director of public awareness.

*Khao Yai, Thailand’s oldest national park, cradles an endangered biodiversity and is a major watershed for the surrounding plains, farms and communities. To confront the poaching and habitat destruction, which was threatening the forest, WildAid concentrated on the people living on the forest’s edges. Three villages were targeted as pilots for a community outreach project to give the locals new ways to increase their incomes without destroying the forest.*

Traditionally, women had gathered wild vegetables from the forest to feed their families. Lately, they had been picking aloewood to sell in such quantities that the park was nearly depleted. Men hunted and snared animals and sold animal meat. In the mid-1990s, those traditions were outlawed as a conservation measure, but local communities were provided no alternatives. After sending their children to school with only a bag of rice to eat, the women illegally trod into the forests in search of extra food. Their husbands continued hunting and setting traps despite the risks of being caught. “They understood the ecosystem and what would happen, but they had no choices,” says Krisana. WildAid organized public forums to discuss ideas for free-range chicken, mushroom, and insect farming, confectionary production, and other possibilities. The men weren’t very interested, recalls WildAid (Thailand) executive director, Steven Galster. The women barely spoke.
But after the meetings, the women rushed to Krisana and insisted on the skills training. Listening to the voices outside the meeting, WildAid organized women’s groups to initiate different projects. When the community farming initiatives began to take off, the men suddenly took an interest and stopped their forest poaching as well, says Krisana.

The outreach project has been so successful that is considering expanding to five more villages. “It is helping the development of women leaders, and it is changing relationships between women and men,” says Krisana.

**Gender Gaps Still Remain**

A lack of awareness of the different lifestyles, roles, needs and interests of men and women can easily sabotage development. It can render development effort inefficient, ineffective and unsustainable.

Gender unawareness has so far created gaps between men and women in many aspects of life, with women in a more disadvantaged position. Such gender inequality has to be addressed. A gender lens is required.
“Gender equality is a core development issue - a development in its own right”.

*The World Bank*
SECTION II
NORROWING GENDER GAPS

Gender Gaps

The past several decades have seen Thailand moving satisfactorily down the road to prosperity. The country’s economic performance had been satisfactory and the country achieved a remarkable double digit economic growth in mid 1990’s, prior to the downturn. However, these impressive gains have concealed diverse patterns of growth, vast differences in economic well being, and equity and vulnerability to poverty within the country between the men and women.

Attempts have been made in the past several decades to fill up the existing gaps between men and women. Despite full-fledged advocacy, gender inequality still remains in many areas. It is an issue that has always been brushed aside as a trivial subject for discussion among those in power. It has never been taken up as a national agenda, yet it is now an issue that has to be properly addressed if the priority of the country is to get out of poverty and to ensure development sustainability. It is an issue that the country cannot turn away from, nor regard as irrelevant.

Hence, the linkages among gender gaps, poverty and development inefficiency and ineffectiveness need to be urgently recognized, particularly when the current government is declaring war on poverty, a major stumbling block to the country’s prosperity.

Identification of gender dimensions in development is necessary as the first step toward addressing gender inequality. The following discussions will focus on major areas of gender gaps by using the World Bank’s four identified dimensions of poverty. These dimensions can be better redressed by mainstreaming gender into poverty alleviation schemes (World Bank, 2000):

✦ *Opportunity* - lack of access to labor markets, employment opportunities and to productive resources; constraints on mobility; and in the case of women, time burdens resulting from the need to combine domestic duties, productive activities and management of community resources.

✦ *Capacity* - lack of access to public services, such as education and health.

✦ *Security* - vulnerability to economic risks and to civil and domestic violence.

✦ *Empowerment* - being without voice and without power at the household, community and national levels.

It is time that such imbalances as lack of productive opportunity, constraints on access, lack of control of resources, and various economic insecurities confronted by women be brought to the forefront and rectified. All four dimensions of poverty are closely interrelated. Improvements in one area help strengthen all others, most especially in the
case of empowerment. Empowerment allows people to improve their access to opportunities, services and security.

**Lack of Economic Opportunity and Productive Resources**

Gender differences in income-earning capacity still exist, as do such gender issues as access to, and control of, financial capital and credit, and the triple burden of women. It is vital to address these issues if economic opportunities for women are to be fully realized and a better quality of live achieved for all.

**Employment opportunities**

Participation of women in the Thai labour force is around 43%. These employed persons are scattered in various kinds of jobs. However, statistics reveal that there are twice as many women as men maintaining household businesses, and these women are unpaid. The biggest gap between men and women is in the role of business owner. There were 1,900,000 female business owners compared to 7,800,000 males (National Statistical Office, 2001 a).

Differential earning patterns are also seen between sexes. As seen in Table 1, the agriculture, manufacturing, commerce and service industries find female workers clustered in the low-income category, while male workers dominate the middle and high-income categories.

With regard to the incomes earned by female and male members of the household, that of males was higher, except for the year 1988 (Kaosaard and Kaewmeesee, 2000).

However, women’s average contributions to household income have increased from 29.8 percent in 1976 to 39 percent in 1998.

**Access to financial resources**

In Thailand, access to financial capital has been much more limited not only because they have fewer assets but also because of the different gender roles ascribed by society. This is especially true for poor women. Women usually control the family finances, but outside the household the situation is different, depending on whether the matter concerns informal or formal credit.

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**Table 1: Income by Selected Industry and Sex, 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Less than 6,501 Baht</th>
<th>6,501-10,000 Baht</th>
<th>More than 10,000 Baht</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Financial institutions have been available for loans and savings. However, services have not been extensively available, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Financial institutions have complex structures and regulations that often make procuring a loan very difficult. A woman applying for a loan in her own name often faces the challenge of the bank’s requirement that the head of the household sign the loan agreement. Other conditions set for loans also made the process more difficult for the poor.

Despite the many barriers that exist in terms of women’s accessibility to financial institutions, women still have some access. In many cases, funds are generally obtained from wealthy villagers who charge interest rates as high as 20 percent. Interest amounts are usually already deducted when the loan is disbursed. The conditions for procuring loans often exploit and disadvantage women.

However, for these informal loans, women have much better access than men due to their positive reputation for loan repayment. In some cases, husbands are refused informal loans and borrowing preference is given to the wives.

It should be noted that NGOs have been of great assistance to women in accessing financial capital. Some provide loans and some serve as guarantors or intermediaries with the financial institutions.

With the establishment of the Tambon (Sub-district) Administrative Organization (TAO) in 1998, another channel for financial resources has emerged. It has proved to be another institution where women can access financial resources. However, formal proposals have to be submitted for TAO consideration and approval may be hampered by its male-dominated structure.

**Box 6: Tambon Administrative Organization: Another important channel for financial resources**

To get the attention of the all-male body of the local sub-district tambon administrators, Orapin Vimonphusit presented success stories of women’s projects in the Northern Home Workers Development Center network. As a result of women’s home-based handicraft projects, family incomes have jumped from around 4,500 baht per month to between 10,000 and 50,000 baht, depending on the season.

The previous lack of interest in helping women’s groups vanished. “Now the tambon has a better vision on occupation provision,” she says. “They offer us training on skills and marketing management. They discuss proposal-writing with the women according to the women’s needs and capacity.” Orapin recognizes this new relationship as critical to women’s lives. “The tambon will be more of an important source of funds in the future due to decentralization. If they have a gender perspective, there will be more access to training and funds”.

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In the past several years, an environment more conducive to women’s access to financial resources has emerged. Despite the requirement that a borrower must be a head of household to be eligible for credit and loans, there have been many situations in recent years that have contributed to women’s increased access to financial capital. Gender differentials may still not be a point of consideration as early as the planning stages, but the overall result has been positive for women.

The effects of the economic crisis, which began in 1997, has greatly aggravated the country’s poverty problem. The impact has been most profoundly felt by poor women, who have suffered decreased saving capacity and less access to credit or financial resources. To a certain extent, however, the crisis has brought about new channels through which women are able to gain access to financial resources.

Recent strategies to ease the economic crisis include strengthening financial institutions, debt restructuring, tax and law reforms, investment promotion, and market expansion, as well as improvements in corporate governance. Strategies devised to cushion the economic impact were not designed to consider the differential impacts on women and men. However, as women are usually the poorest of the poor, those schemes that have targeted the poor can implicitly be interpreted as favourable to women. There have been several projects and government policies that have specifically provided positive conditions for women in terms of accessibility to credit and financial resources.

New Government Policies Impacting on Grassroots Economy: Better Access For Women

The present government policies emphasize strengthening grassroots level economies to boost the national economy. Although such policies may not have been intentionally and specifically formulated to target female beneficiaries, the impact could be seen. Women’s have gained more access to resources.

Important projects that greatly benefit women include the following:

**The People’s Bank**

The People’s Bank is one project under the Government Savings Bank. Never before has access to credit been this easy. The loans can be as small as Bht 15,000 and lending has few requirements. The People’s Bank requires a co-signature of an acquaintance, but does not necessarily require collateral. Interest is 1% per month and the repayment period is 12 months.

The main goals of the People’s Bank are to reduce the people’s interest burden, and to raise their incomes to improve quality of life. Its philosophy highlights income-generating activities. At the end of 2001, the year of its inception, the Bank had 485,773 members; 339,968 of its members had borrowed money (Government’s Savings Bank, 2002). Among these, almost 80% were female borrowers. The majority of them are small-business entrepreneurs who require some funds to expand their businesses or increase cash flow.
**Village and Urban Revolving Funds**

In 2001, to strengthen the grassroots economy, the government established the *Village and Urban Revolving Fund* which provided Bht 1,000,000 to each of the 71,364 villages and 3,517 urban communities. The aim is to widen economic opportunities and promote self-reliance through strengthening the fund management capacity at the grassroots level. The Fund is to be managed, and the conditions of loans set, by the villagers themselves.

At the end of 2001, Bht 69,097,000 was disbursed to the villages whose requests met all the conditions set by the regulation (Public Relations Department, 2002). About two thirds of the loan facility was extended to the agricultural sector while the remaining was given to cottage industry, emergency relief, group activities, as well as commercial and service sectors.

Although follow-up studies do not have sex-disaggregated statistics on those who have borrowed, the Fund has offered women more control of the village financial resources.

**Community Enterprise Scheme**

Another woman-friendly organization that has improved financial resources for women is the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) which has established the *Community Enterprise Credit Scheme*. The Scheme supports government policies for solving economic problems through the creation of employment- and income-generating activities for rural people, who comprise the largest segment of the Thai population (Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives, 2002).

This scheme will benefit women considerably as they have already formed groups within any village. Also, the procedures for borrowing have been made more accessible for women. Since the establishment of the schemes in August 2002, over 80% of the clients have been women’s entrepreneurial groups, according to the Bank’s project staff.

**Time constraints and triple burden of women**

Despite better access to financial resources, women’s triple burden - productive work, reproductive work and community activities - has constrained their economic opportunities. If men’s share of reproductive work remains the same, economic opportunities of women may not be fully utilized. This could also be detrimental to the health of women.

Changes are gradually taking place. Males’ share of household chores is increasing, particularly in urban areas. In rural areas, there have also been cases where men have been more involved, taking the lead role in household work while women are more active in production.
Capacity Not Fully Maximized

A key strategy indispensable in any development effort is the strengthening of human capital. Crucial to productive capacity, the approach’s main components include education, training, skill development, health and nutrition. These components carry gender dimensions that require attention due to the gender gaps that are still present.

Education and training

In terms of education, there have been improvements in the rates of female enrollment. The proportions of girls and boys enrolled at the primary and secondary levels are about the same, and there is near gender parity at higher levels of education, with females students outnumbering males. Yet, the number of Thai university graduates accounts for only 5% of the country’s total population.

Table 2: Number of male and female students at different levels (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of education</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage of female students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary level</td>
<td>5,996,507</td>
<td>48.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary Level</td>
<td>2,432,706</td>
<td>49.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary Level</td>
<td>1,138,215</td>
<td>55.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>73,648</td>
<td>56.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Regarding gender in terms of fields of study, there are vast differences in the proportions of males and females in certain subject. Females still concentrate on subjects for which there is lower demand in the labor market. Subjects that many female students choose are liberal arts and medical sciences. Subjects that are least chosen by female students are law and engineering (Office of Women’s Affairs and Family Development, 2003).

While the government has made efforts to increase the supply of skilled workers, only 10% of people attending pre-employment training in regional and provincial centers are women, and less than 2% of the instructors are women. Opportunities for training have been more limited for women than men. This has resulted in female workers being concentrated in the lower levels of the employment hierarchy.

More than 70% of the female workers in the top three export industries have lower skill levels than men, and therefore earn less than men. In major industries, the proportion of women is higher in the groups with no education and the ‘only elementary education’ groups, whereas in the secondary and higher education categories, there are fewer women than men. (See Table 3)
Women and Men Moving towards a Partnership of Equals in Development

Health

Access to health services has improved on the whole in the past several decades as demonstrated by the increase in life expectancy. At present, life expectancy is 75 years of age for women and 70 years of age for men. The current government’s health policy, which provides medical care for everyone at Bht 30 per hospital visit, has actually made health care much more accessible to the poor. This scheme is similar to a health insurance scheme, which offers equitable medical care for all.

However, in reproductive health in particular, some services are not readily available to women. Women lack access to information on the importance of breast and cervical cancer screenings and rarely seek them out. There are no clinics that specifically help women who conceive unwanted pregnancies, need family counseling, or become victims of violence. All women are entitled to contraception, but social stigmas prevent many unmarried females from obtaining it.

HIV/AIDS has had a devastating effect on human resources in Thailand, particularly in the area of productive capacity. Especially alarming is the fact that the percentage of females infected with HIV/AIDS is higher than that of males in the 10-24 age group.

The economic impact on families with HIV-infected members and AIDS deaths is significant. One study reported that, on average, medical care costs for each HIV/AIDS patient from the beginning of their illness until death was equivalent to approximately 6 months of the average annual...
household income. In addition, about half of the family production was lost due to the reduction in the labour supply, leading to a 47.5 percent decrease in total family income.

Box 7: Living and Hurting with HIV/AIDS

When she was four months pregnant, Pimjai Intamoon tested positive with HIV. She was 27. She did not recognize her husband’s HIV positive status when she married him.

“The doctor asked me how I would take care of the baby under my poor economic situation. My husband was going to die. My husband’s mother was very old and I would have to take care of her and his nephews. I knew I had to go back to work to take care of his family and myself. I talked with my husband and then I chose to abort the pregnancy.”

Her husband lived for 10 years after being diagnosed. “I had to borrow so much money to pay for his medicines. It took me five years after he died to pay it back. I had to find other jobs to get the money.” She worked as a welder by day and then hunted frogs at night to sell in the market.

Pimjai is greatly concerned about the discrimination faced by women living with HIV/AIDS. In the hospital, she says she was treated like an animal. “When they saw I had HIV, they moved me to a storage room. The staff was reluctant to touch me. I cried that day.”

Lack of legal knowledge leads to more suffering among women with HIV, according to Pimjai. “They need training workshops to know their rights. We have to change people’s ideas. We have to challenge our culture, our traditions.”

The household strategies adopted to cope with the reduction in income and increased burden of medical cost of family income are numerous. These include reducing consumption, using savings, selling assets and borrowing money, all of which have serious effect on the welfare of most households. Even more serious is the practice of withdrawing children from school and putting them to work in order to increase the family’s income. (United Nations, 1999)

Box 8: Gender and HIV/AIDS

Dr Usa Duongsaa, President of the Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education at Chiang Mai University observes that not many people see how gender relates to them or to their work. She provides a clear example of how gender has implications for the vulnerabilities of women. According to Dr. Usa, gender is like an infection touching everyone: devastating when it is operating on negative stereotypes and healing when it is positive sensitizing. The purpose of incorporating a gender perspective is to rid the system and the society of the negative particles and replace them with healthier understanding and action.

“We have been working with people’s participation methods to raise HIV/AIDS awareness in the Mekong subregion and in Thailand,” says Dr. Usa. “The patterns we see are the same. We have found that when men get infected, they get very well looked after by their wives. When women get infected, they are often abandoned. We hardly
**Lack of Security**

Personal security is a right entitled to all people. But vulnerability and insecurity remain considerably higher for women in terms of protection from economic risks and violence.

**Economic Risks**

The financial crisis, starting in 1997, has exposed vulnerabilities throughout the country. For the poor, they are left with the economic crumbs and yet, in struggling to turn those crumbs into income, they succumb to many unfair practices that the crisis has only reinforced. Gender based discrimination in retrenchment has been observed. Women workers disproportionately lost their jobs due to retrenchment in the manufacturing and service sectors. In 1998, women comprised 60-75% of paid labour (Office of the National Commission on Women’s Affairs, 1998). However, women are resilient in earning extra income in order to provide for the basic needs of their families but their lessening income is being overstretched by the overall economic downturn.

One of the most vulnerable groups is workers in the informal sector, the majority of whom are women. According to the survey by the National Statistical Office, there are more than 20 million people in the informal sector (National Statistical Office 2001 b) while estimates from the labour department are at 16 million people, 90% of whom are women (Center for Study and Development of Homeworkers, 2001). These workers generally work at the place of their own choosing, often at home, and are usually paid at a piece-work rate. They are not under the direct control of the employer but they have no say in the characteristics, nor in the price of what they produce. Informal sector workers receive low and sometimes irregular pay, and have no social security benefits. Labour laws are still rather silent and unclear about their rights.

**Gender-based Violence**

Gender-based violence has been a great concern as its threat and impact instill fear and insecurity in women’s lives. It “disables women, leads to a loss of income and increases what society spends on healthcare” (United Nations Development Programme, 2000). It acts as an obstacle to the full development of many women and undermines their productive capacity.

Gender-based violence needs to be prioritized in the national agenda and in the issues studied from a holistic point of view. Its impact is extensive. It not only under-mines the personal integrity of those victim-ized, but instigates a huge economic loss that remains overlooked. The economic loss as a result of domestic violence, if calculated in
monetary terms, is tremendous. Although many aspects cannot be estimated, some can be concretely considered, such as the costs related to the time spent by the police, attorneys, judges, doctors and social workers dealing with the issues. Losses due to absences from work or to the reduction in productivity of all those directly associated with the victim, the abuser or those related to them could also be estimated.

Gender-based violence is the core issue to be tackled if maximized utilization of human resources is regarded as one of the instruments in the country’s development.

It is manifested in all forms - physical, psychological and sexual abuses which take place in homes, schools, work places and public spaces. Violence against women has long been prevalent and has intensified since the economic crisis. Yet, there is a lack of public understanding, and the problem is mostly regarded as a private matter, not as a societal issue. Hence, prioritizing the problem in the national agenda has not been easy.

The prevalence rate of domestic violence is difficult to determine but can be assumed to be underestimated. Statistics from 8 hospitals of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration in 2003 revealed that among 1,714 women seeking medical care, 725 were physically injured by their husbands and partners (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, 2004). Another record of a hospital in Rayong, a small province in the East also showed about 400 cases of women seeking help for physical injuries in 2001. The majority of the women were physically abused by their partners.

The most recent survey on domestic violence by Mahidol University indicated that among the 2800 women interviewed, 44% were being abused by their husband or partner (Mahidol University, 2002).

As for sexual abuse, police records indicated that in 2000, there were 4,037 rape cases (Bhongsvej and Vichitranonda, 2001). Vajira Hospital in 2002 reported 106 rape cases. Only 9 of these cases were rapes by strangers; the rest were known by the survivors. Sexual abuse cases taken to court in 1999 totaled 5,840, twice as many as that of 1990 (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej, 2001).

Box 9: Detrimental Values: Why Some Men Hit

“If I do not beat her, she won’t respect my orders,” a calm, seemingly well-mannered Thai husband once explained to Saranya Chaiyasuta, who was then his wife’s lawyer. As a member of the Women’s Lawyers Association, Saranya takes on many pro bono cases involving domestic violence. The problem, as this husband saw it, was that his wife “Challenged his dignity.” It is a common perspective held by men in Thailand, says Saranya.

The husband was speaking to Saranya because he didn’t understand why his wife was pursuing a divorce case against him. They were an older couple with two grown children. The woman had endured years of abuse that had started early in their marriage. After finally reporting him to the police, the husband was “humiliated” and afraid his jewelry business would be negatively affected. He beat her harder than usual. She went to the police again but did not want to pursue a legal case. “She didn’t want to send him to jail. She just wanted him to stop beating her,” says Saranya.
Yet the plan has not been budgeted and is poorly implemented and monitored.

Other past and current efforts include incorporating a women’s desk at selected police stations, establishing a One Stop Crisis Center in hospitals, developing community-based activities to prevent violence, as well as increasing the gender sensitization of judicial officials.

**Sexual harassment**

Another problem that makes women vulnerable and insecure particularly in work places is sexual harassment. There are many anecdotes of women being sexually harassed, but the cases are not brought to the attention of those highest in authority. The Labour Protection Act of 1998 has clearly stipulated that employers or supervisors are prohibited to sexually harass female employees. Violators are subject to fines not exceeding Bht 20,000. Despite legal protections, the Act’s enforcement has been weak, causing many women to feel insecure and live in fear.

There have been attempts by both the NGOs and the government to eliminate gender-based violence but they are piecemeal. A holistic approach has not yet been adopted. The Constitution of 1998 also has a provision in Article 53, which stipulates that the state has to protect family members from domestic violence. Yet, concrete results have not yet been seen. A legislative draft on family violence is currently under scrutiny by different political parties and should soon be deliberated in the Parliament.

Since 1999, the Cabinet has approved an eight-point measure related to the elimination of violence (Office of the National Commission on Women’s Affairs, 1998),

Saranya believes awareness about domestic violence within the government is very weak. “People perceive they are aware of the violence but they don’t think it’s serious enough to worry about. And they think that simply improving the economic situation will relieve these problems.”

There are laws to protect abused women, but the strong criminal punishments ultimately leave women feeling more vulnerable. Saranya believes some type of punishment should be specially designed for this kind of case. “It is a sensitive family issue, and we need to figure out how to maintain the relationship of the couple by not ruining the infrastructure of the family. And sometimes men come out of the punishment but the real problem hasn’t changed. Often, women do not pursue a criminal case because they do not want to interrupt the economic situation of the family. The man cannot work if he is sent to jail.”

Empowerment Gaps:
**Exclusion in Decision-making**

Gender gaps in this area are clear, judging from the gross imbalance of women leaders in all levels of government and among the upper tiers of civil service jobs.

Large gaps exist at all levels, from local to national. In the Senate election of 2000, there were 115 women candidates; 21 were elected, making them 10.5% of the 200 members. In the Parliament elections of 2001, there were 347 women candidates; 47 were elected - 9%
of the total. (Gender and Development Research Institute, 2003) Of the 36 Cabinet members in 2003, only 3 were women.

Of the 75 provincial governors in 2003, none were women. Of the 7,245 Sub-district heads, 1.8% were women. Of the 69,127 village heads currently, 2.1% were women (Gender and Development Research Institute, 2003)

In the government office, progress has been the greatest with 16% of the executives being female.

Participating in decisions made within the household, community and both local and national governments, allows women’s needs and concerns to be heard and acted upon. All of these issues are intertwined. Limited access to resources and a weaker ability to generate income limit women’s power to influence resource allocation and investment decisions.

Yet, while lower-economic classes of women have proven that they can generate resources, another hurdle remains. It is the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>National Government</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of Parliament ¹</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>9.2 90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(February 2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senator ¹</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>10.0 90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(February 2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Member ¹</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8.3 91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(February 2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge ² (2003)</td>
<td>3,001</td>
<td>20.6 79.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney ³ (2001)</td>
<td>1,692</td>
<td>11.5 88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Service Executive ⁴</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(April 2001)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.0 92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 10</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>12.1 87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>16.5 83.5</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Women on average constitute less than 21% of the decision-makers at the national level.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provincial Government</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Governor</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>- 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Provincial Governor</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>1.8 98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Officer</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>0.3 99.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy District Officer</td>
<td>5,658</td>
<td>11.2 88.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Elected Local Government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Council Member</td>
<td>2,232</td>
<td>4.8 95.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality Council Member</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>6.0 94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-district Head</td>
<td>7,245</td>
<td>1.8 98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village Head</td>
<td>69,127</td>
<td>6.0 94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAO Board Chairperson*</td>
<td>6,747</td>
<td>3.8 96.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-district Administrative</td>
<td>127,594</td>
<td>6.7 93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization (SAO) Members*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Women constitute less than 10% of the decision-makers at the local level.**

Source: Gender and Development Research Institute derived from Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, Office of the Judicial Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Office of the Attorney-General, Office of the Civil Service Commission, the Prime Minister’s office.
social attitudes that have limited their ability to participate in the decision-making processes.

Giving women a “voice” is the goal and the means to overcome the other areas where gaps in gender equality are still wide. Voice is reflected also through the research and analyzing of the needs, concerns and experiences of each segment of society on a sex-disaggregated data basis: young girls and boys, women and men, old women and men, ethnic, poor, disabled, working, non-working, and working females and males in the informal sector.

There is a need to build up the numbers of women representatives at the local and national levels of government and in political parties, so that women’s concerns for themselves, their families and their communities can be better heard and acted upon. The few women in government find that being a minority keeps them from freely speaking out.

As women enter the political arena at a much later stage than men, they need superior preparation and training in order to successfully run in the elections. It is not only the women running for office, but also the electorate that needs to be trained. Although barriers and limitations abound for women, there are spaces for women who are determined to make changes for the better.

Efforts to increase women’s voices both in administration and government and politics have been attempted using a number of modalities. Major strategies that have been used include leadership training and the imposition of quotas for women in decision-making positions. It is undeniable that the different perspectives women bring to such roles have made the decisions more balanced and responsive to both sexes. Although hard evidence is still needed to fully claim that women can make a difference and a positive impact on the development direction and agenda, negative consequences of having more women in key decision-making positions have not materialized. In fact, social issues have received greater attention as women’s representation has grown.

**Box 10: With a female leader, more women’s priorities are addressed**

Siriporn Panyasane believed corruption was keeping her local government from providing services and projects that women wanted, which, along with the discrimination exercised by the leaders, prompted her to run for office with the Tambon (sub-district) Administration Organization. Her primary level education did not pose a problem, as she took on local politics to make a change.

Siriporn was elected twice to the Tambon Administrative Organizations; the second time the 20 members wanted her as president. At that time, there was an unusual number - five - of women in the assembly. For two and a half years she says she had the freedom to provide training programs open to both women and men rather than to just spend their budget on construction projects.
Box 11: Training the Election Candidates and the Electorate

“Women have to prove to local people they can do public things. We also need to stimulate young women to seek student leadership positions. The more women get elected to decision-making positions, the more role models there are,” says Dr. Bupa Anantsushatkul, of the Research and Statistical Department in the Faculty of Education at Chiang Mai University. If they have experience as some kind of a leader, even in a weavers’ group, the move to the political sphere is a little less bumpy.

Training the electorate about politics is also important, she adds, and it needs to be done differently than the government’s typical lecture approach. The more successful methods she has seen rely on a participatory approach. The Lanna Women’s Study Center, which she started in 1997, practiced this approach. “Villagers tell us they’re happy that we give them a chance to give their voice to other people - that we don’t change their voice into ours.”

Listing the issues for communities, not only in the North, Bupa first mentions the “deep problem of inequality among the sexes in national politics, in local politics and in the civil sector. People don’t see that inequality is a problem.”

A Quota for Women

In the past, attempts to place women in decision-making positions have focused on empowering the women themselves. The idea for an imposition of a quota, or a number of reserved seats for women, is considered a faster track for women to assume decision-making power. This idea has been attempted, but thus far has only been successful in one case. The current government has a policy on strengthening grassroots economies through allocation of a one million baht fund to each village. The implementation of this policy has, for the first time, established a quota system for management members by the government (Vichitranonda and Bhongsvej, 2002). The regulation of the Village and Urban Community Funds stipulates that the Village Fund Committee has to consist of equal number of males and females. Although it cannot be considered a guarantee, such a requirement should provide better chances for female villagers to borrow loans from the Village Funds, in addition to offering women more control over village finance management creating more spaces for women in the public arena.

Approaches and strategies for the empowerment of women that are multi-pronged lead to more rapid progress. However, quotas as a “fast track” approach to get women into decision-making cannot be overlooked and ought to be attempted as often as opportunities arise.
More intensified efforts have to be made to close the existing gender gaps in opportunities, capacity, security and empowerment. A gender perspective in which differences in the roles, interests and needs of men and women are fully recognized is required in the mainstream of all development schemes. Simultaneously, strategies that empower women and increase their participation in setting development directions and agendas have to be incorporated at every stage of policy and planning processes.

Simple awareness of women’s disadvantaged position in society is a very significant step forward. However, such awareness is necessary but not sufficient. A full commitment to incorporate a mainstream gender perspective with gender equity and equality as the goal is required.
“Equality: No individual and no nation must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development. The equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured.”

*United Nations Millennium Declaration*
SECTION III
MOVING TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY

FACILITATING LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Despite the remaining gender gaps, there are hopes that such gaps can be narrowed. A few facilitating mechanisms exist that could accelerate the effort.

The Constitution

The promulgation of the People’s Constitution in 1997 was the most significant positive change that has moved, and will continue to move, Thai society closer to the goal of gender equality.

The Constitution includes several provisions that reflect a substantive vision for equality. Legal equality between men and women has been guaranteed, not merely by prohibiting discrimination, but also by making room for the promotion of the conditions needed to make legal equality real and effective. Affirmative action policies could thus be adopted to remove the effects of past discrimination. Moreover, the state is required by the Constitution to promote gender equality.

The Constitution has also created some mechanisms that women can use to advance their position in society. An Administrative Court has been set up to hear petitions brought by citizens about violations of their rights. Another significant milestone is the establishment of the Human Rights Commission to which violations of rights can also be petitioned. Both these mechanisms could prove favourable for women’s protection of their rights.

It should be noted, however, that the existence of a positive legal framework for women’s rights as stipulated in the Constitution does not automatically give rights to women. But at the very least, it legitimizes women’s claims for rights and creates a space for women.

Obligations to International Conventions

Another framework around which gender equality could be pursued is the obligation of the country in the international arena. Thailand has already been a signatory of many United Nations conventions, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The most recent progress has been the adoption of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW by the government, which implies that Thailand will allow the receipt and processing of individual complaints, as well as those lodged by groups in the name of female victims of human rights violations.

In addition, the Platform of Action espoused in the 4th World Conference of Women in Beijing 1995 has also been adopted. The Beijing Platform of Action has clearly established the concept of gender
mainstreaming as a global strategy to promote gender equality.

**Restructured National Machinery**

Since the bureaucratic reform in October 2002, the national machinery, formerly the Office of the National Commission on Women’s Affairs, has been restructured and renamed as the Office of Women’s Affairs and Family Development under the jurisdiction of the newly established Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Gender equality promotion activities form the major part of the missions of the Office of Gender Equality Promotion which is under the Office of Women’s Affairs and Family Development. This new structure should enable a better oversight on gender issues and greatly facilitate the advancement of the status of women.

**New Institutional Mechanisms in the Government Service**

The government meanwhile has also established some institutional mechanisms which should enhance gender equality. The Cabinet approved the establishment of the position of Chief Gender Equality Officer in each department in 2002 to oversee the promotion of gender equality in the government sector.

The Chief Gender Equality Officer, who serves as the gender focal point in government departments, must be an executive who has attained at least a deputy director-general level. The main task is the oversight of gender integration in the policy and planning processes, including the delivery of services to the public in his/her respective government departments. Headed and supported by a team of trained gender trainers/advocates, the Chief of Gender Equality Officer can be expected to be instrumental in effectively mainstreaming gender and development issues in government service.

This context of more intensified advocacy for gender equality should result in further recognition of women’s voices and attention to the need for equitable and sustainable development of the country.

**THE WAY FORWARD**

Existing institutional mechanisms provide solid grounds for further advancement towards gender equality. However, some other measures and tools have also been put in place to accelerate progress. Much greater awareness on the importance of gender equality has been witnessed in Thailand.

The following are some additional critical strategies espoused by prominent gender advocates, which, if seriously developed and implemented, should place gender equality within our reach.

**The National Strategy and Plans**

**Women’s Development Plan**

The current Women’s Development Plan covers the same period of the 9th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002 to 2006). The plan identifies areas and strategies for improving the condition and position of women.
The five key issues in the strategy cover:

✦ Strengthening women’s potential by transforming social attitudes, encouraging self-esteem and self-reliance by making women ready for participation in the development process, and creating opportunities for more work and income generation. This process includes reducing illiteracy among older women through provision of adult learning and informal education services, changing education curricula as well as child-rearing practices to be free of gender biases, and teaching women life skills to improve their self-esteem.

✦ Increasing women’s participation in decision-making. The targets that have been set reflect an increase in the proportion of women candidates in all elections to one-third. This figure doubles the number of women in administration and increases the ratio of women in national committees to 50%.

Major approaches identified include introduction of special measures for the promotion of women to decision-making positions, the provision of continued and systematic leadership training for both women running for and holding decision-making positions, and the strengthening of women’s roles in the promotion of good governance.

✦ Promoting equality and social protection through the law, providing better enforcement of fair existing laws, and increasing social security for women in health, education and employment. Heightening the awareness of men and women about their constitutional rights and gender equality is also emphasized. Strategies include changing all laws and ministry regulations that discriminate against women and continuously teaching gender education and human rights to all girls and boys from an early age. There is also an emphasis on strengthening networking among public and private sectors, including encouraging civilians to monitor law enforcement for better protection of women.

To ensure social security for women, the expansion of social services for females of all ages is recommended. Such an expansion would include the provision of daycare centers for children, welfare for the elderly, and the enactment of social security laws to protect women workers in the informal sector.

✦ Advocating for media support of women’s development. This strategy involves eliminating the presentation of women as sex objects and ensuring that media coverage focuses more on the promotion of women’s potential and gender equality, as well as their active participation in economic, social and political activities.

✦ Approaches to achieve such targets include strengthening gender sensitivity among all forms of media, providing advice and consultation to the media on promoting women’s status, and promoting effective networking among women working in the media.

✦ Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of women’s organizations at all levels within the public and private sectors for better networking and more effective information management systems for policy formulation, planning, monitoring and dissemination of information on women affairs.
Priorities are targeted at strengthening institutional capacity through the upgrading of the national machinery, improving solidarity of the networks among those working for women, and establishing well-coordinated information systems and resource centers among various agencies.

It should be noted, however, that this plan is only indicative in that it neither identifies the responsible parties nor the time frame for implementation. Effective and close monitoring in the further development of an action and implementation plan is required. Despite such limitations, the plan provides a comprehensive situational analysis on the status of women and identifies strategies that can be adopted by the concerned parties.

**Box 13: The National Strategy**

“We call it the National Policy for Women’s Development,” Dr. Pensri Phijaisanit, a prominent women’s health advocate, explains with her hand resting on the published strategy document. “We talked about changing the name, but it is for the national machinery [then the National Commission on Women’s Affairs]. In our minds, though, we were thinking about gender development.”

“When we talked about understanding society, about our strategy for the media, about changing social attitudes, we mentioned gender,” she adds. The “we” refers to the twelve committee members, including one man, one woman doctor, a few academics and several government officials. Dr. Pensri was in charge of developing the national strategy on women and traveled the country, region by region, explaining the policy and targets to government and NGO representatives – very few of whom have had any gender training – to help them devise operational plans at the provincial level. As Dr. Pensri acknowledges, this is only a strategy. How it will be achieved is for the operational planners to devise. “The key is for them to integrate the strategy on women into the existing system and to integrate with other sectors,” she says. Dr. Pensri anticipates budgeting to be a big hurdle. But she says it is now possible to pool small sector budgets to create one implementing fund. The greatest challenge, she concedes, is going to be commitment.

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**Gender Master Plan**

Another important issue is the formulation of the gender master plan by each government agency. This is part of the requirement that comes under the responsibility of the newly established Chief Gender Equality Officer of each department. In an effort to mainstream gender in government sectors, the gender master plan entails activities to be carried out by each department to promote gender equality and equity. Reporting on the results of the implementation of the plan has to be made yearly and submitted to the Cabinet in January of each year.

As the post of the Chief Gender Equality Officer was created quite recently, government departments are currently in the process of formulating their gender master plans with...
the assistance of the Office of the Gender Equality Promotion and the Office of the Civil Service Commission (which has the responsibility of reporting to the Cabinet). The initial period may prove difficult as the gender capacity has not been built. However, once the idea of gender has been mainstreamed, the existing gender gaps are bound to narrow.

**Gender Budgeting**

The concept of gender budgeting has emerged in recent years from gender advocates. While the institutional structure is paving the way for gender equality, there has been no appropriate allocation of budgetary funds. Until funds are routed toward gender issues, success will not come as easily. The standpoint of gender advocates is that the impact of the development projects need to be assessed separately on men and women. Strategies for the improvement of the status, if it is found to be inferior, have to be integrated so that budget allocations can be made appropriately.

The World Bank commissioned a study several years ago on women’s share of government budgets. The results illustrated some problematic spending issues. Some government agencies did not manage to utilize fully the money allocated to them for activities of interest to women. Some women’s activities were not completed on schedule and money earmarked for women’s projects even got rerouted elsewhere (Vichit-Vadakan J. and Lorsuwannarat, T; 2000).

With the gender master plan being formulated by the government departments, an opportunity of integrating gender budgeting has arisen. The Bureau of the Budget is a center for powerful change in which decisions about agencies’ financial allocation are made. Efforts to gender-sensitize the Bureau regarding budget allocations will hold the Bureau responsible for making other government agencies aware of gender issues. Funds should be granted with the intention of benefiting people through gender awareness and should only be reissued after positive performance is proven.

**Legislation**

**Amendments of Discriminatory Laws**

Despite the Constitution’s provision for gender equality, there are laws and regulations that are still discriminatory, particularly those related to family institutions. Women’s organizations have advocated to have them amended, but the government’s formal process of review and amendments has not yet begun to address the issue. Some forward progress has been achieved, however, regarding the Family Name Act, legislation that requires women to change their family names upon marriage. In June 2003, the Constitutional Court passed a verdict that declared this act unconstitutional.

**Issuance of New Laws**

In addition to advocating for the amendment of existing discriminatory laws, women’s groups advocate for legal equity through the enactment of specific protective laws. Drafts regarding the protection of victims of domestic violence and of female workers in the informal sector are currently in judicial deliberation. A proposal for a gender equality
act has also been drafted, but the matter has not yet been accepted for consideration.

The move to address legal inequality has been slow. A more strategic approach is required in this uphill struggle in order to alter patriarchal attitudes and stereotypic perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

Box 14: Are Thai Laws Fair?

Dr. Kittipong Kittayarak currently the Director-General of the Probation Department within the Ministry of Justice, had a particular interest in questioning the fairness of existing laws. He elaborated on some of the most problematic laws that victimized or failed to protect women: the abortion law, the rape law and the bodily harm law. “I see most clearly in domestic violence, the law is not just,” he says. “The abortion law is an obvious case of unfairness to women in Thailand. There are so many reasons why women have to resort to abortion. When they have an unwanted pregnancy, the state doesn’t provide any help, assistance or counseling. But it punishes the women and lets the others involved – the men – go free.”

Dr. Kittipong believes broader and quicker changes are at the country’s fingertips, but are not being tapped. “The Constitution provides powerful mechanisms to push for that equality across the board,” he states. Among them are the ombudsmen, the Human Rights Commission to handle Constitutional protection and provision of the rights of women and children. The Constitutional Court is another mechanism that can be used to align the Constitution’s provisions with the practices of government officials and authorities.

“I would not select single issues, like ....... – which is important and I support the move to amend the law – but I would take advantage of the mechanisms within the Constitution and push toward changing many things rather than taking only one at a time.”

While he acknowledges that women receive unfair treatment under Thai law, Dr. Kittipong recognizes how women are discriminated against even before they enter the criminal justice system. “They’re limited in opportunity because their roles were given in advance, when they were born. It’s getting better but the opportunity to develop and to get good jobs, good pay, climb the ladder – even in civil service – is more difficult for women than for men.”

Dr. Kittipong believes that using the Constitution as an instrument for change and pushing issues of whether laws and practices are fair is easier than fighting against tradition.

Societal Values and Attitudes

The rigid division of labour has placed women as homemakers whose boundary is within the household, rather than the public arena. Such stereotypes have restricted opportunities for many women to develop to their fullest potential, which undermines the maximum utilization of the society’s human resources. Under the existing value system of patriarchal domination, women are portrayed as sex objects. This situation leads to prostitution, trafficking and sexual violence. Attempts to remedy these social ills have been
made through the years by both the public and private sectors, and different activities are continuously carried out depending on the mandates of the organizations.

**The starting point: the Government**

With the establishment of the position of Chief Gender Equality Officer and the requirement of the formulation of gender master plan by each department, building up gender awareness has emerged as a significant tasks. Assigned with the task of promoting gender equality in the government sector, government departments have started to take the first step in strengthening gender capacity among their own officials, the initial effective entry point for increased awareness at the societal level. It is therefore expected that better gender awareness will be inevitably be achieved.

**Success stories to raise public awareness**

There have been a number of positive efforts to highlight the changing roles of women. The Gender and Development Research Institute has conducted several such programs, including the annual presentation of the Prime Minister’s Award for Outstanding Women in eleven different fields. The Directory of Women Change Agents has been published and disseminated in three volumes to highlight the career achievements of over 200 women. Such publicity of women’s achievements has been instrumental to a better recognition of women’s potential and capacity.

**Shaping public attitudes through the Media**

Media, with its catalytic role in shaping public attitudes, still portrays women in traditional roles and as sexual objects. Regular and close monitoring of media presentation by women’s groups has helped to ensure a reduction in gender bias in the media. These efforts have also encouraged media coverage to focus more on the promotion of women’s potential, gender equality and active participation in economic, social and political activities.

Over the past year, a series of meetings organized by the Office of Gender Equality Promotion has been held for media people and gender advocates. The main objectives are to strengthen gender sensitivity within all forms of media, to provide advice and consultation regarding the media’s presentation of women’s status, and to promote networking among women employed in the media.

**Box 15: Striking at the Heart of the Problem**

From her simultaneous positions in government, non-government and academic roles, Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan has studied a huge cross-section of Thailand. She speaks with an unparalleled view of “the heart of the problem” and offers some ideas to improve the flow of change.

“If the Government can recognize that women are actually active in the development process and give them some kind of formal role with institutional support...
make them representatives on committees or disbursers of funds – it will be a step in the right direction,” she says. Government, she believes, should focus on amplifying existing structures, should allow communities to access special funds for strengthening families in times of need, and should give social safety-net funds to someone who shows proof of helping others in a network. “It will be women deciding what money to get and how to spend it,” she says.

With regard to women taking leadership roles, Dr. Juree believes that there is a need for more active support of women to become interested in leadership roles when they are young. “Girls need psychological preparation to be competitive throughout life.” She begins to speak of the core issue: changing values.

“Leadership positions are never for women,” she says. “It is widely believed that only men are leaders, and that women might elect men as supervisors. Bosses and managers have told me that women make better workers, but they don’t know how they are as supervisors because they won’t promote them. They follow a traditional belief that women can’t lead.”

Dr. Juree believes there are many creative measures to affect values that have yet to be considered. Possible forces for changes in values include providing funding for writers and producers of enlightened dramas, soap operas and other television programming that bring in ideas of gender.

Communities can encourage systems where women help each other, such as with mutual childcare. They can give awards for good husbands. She states that the socialization of boys must also change. “The masculinity of men has overburdened our boys, our men. The result of that is they feel superior and inferior at the same time.” Letting boys cry, she suggests, is a start. Let men stay home to take care of the children without social ridicule, condemnation or interference, she adds.

Changing men’s habits in the home begins with women, she points out in conclusion. “Empowering women also means you have to empower them on how to manage their households and how to make the men agree to help out.”

Gender information and attitude changes

Women have been invisible in many development projects. Very often, “people” and “household” are regarded as the basic units, as if no differences exist between women and men. To ensure that development policies affect men and women equitably, one must go beyond the aggregate data and break it down onto its component parts. Collection of sex-disaggregated data, therefore, is the first important step to be taken. With such data, some gender issues can be identified and addressed, although it is still not collected in many departments. Important offices, such as the National Statistical Office now have sex-disaggregated databases. In the forthcoming years, as the gender master plan is being
formulated in each government department and gender is moving into the mainstream, it is expected that sex-disaggregated data will soon be made available. It is an absolute necessity for the promotion of critical women’s issues.

**Box 16: Creating awareness from Sex Disaggregated Data**

Dr Suteera Vichitranaonda has been trying to count females and males for a long time. Over a decade ago, she co-founded the Gender and Development Research Institute, in part to alert the Government to trends in inequality between the sexes.

At that time, much existing data appeared generic and therefore often presented misleading pictures. For example, data on school drop-outs were not disaggregated, and, thus failing to distinguish between girls and boys, overlooked the striking reality that girls leave school at higher rates than boys.

Gender information enables good governance. Decision-makers at all levels must be aware of the situation of males and females to ensure that policies or programs implemented correctly address the problems.

Gender awareness relies on numbers. “You have to have information to support your framework. You can’t talk with feelings about men and women.” Real figures, she says, help break down resistance to cultural change.

**Putting Women in Decision-making**

Many obstacles impede women’s road to politics. Barriers to increased political participation include societal attitudes that women’s only appropriate role is that of a homemaker, as well as the more concrete barriers in the political and administrative infrastructures, such as the Thai electoral system. Efforts which have been made to increase the role of women in politics and administration have taken different forms and have been directed at institutional, individual and societal levels. Advocacy NGOs, which have become very active since the Beijing Conference, have concentrated mainly on the promotion of women in the political arena. Efforts to increase participation of women in politics have rested solely on such organizations. The bureaucracy, assumed to be politically neutral, has not paid any attention to strengthen political leadership by or for women. NGOs have attempted to step in and fill the gaps that the bureaucracy has left behind.

Apart from advocacy and campaigns with political parties and the government, the efforts are also directed at strengthening the capacity of women themselves, as well as raising public awareness of gender issues for greater recognition of the roles women play in national development.

One ongoing, local level effort is aimed at gaining support from at least 50,000 people for legislative amendment. The advocacy, led by the Gender and Development Research Institute, is for equal representation of male and female villagers in the Tambon...
Administrative Organizations. Thus far, over 20,000 members of civil society have signed the amendment in support. A total of 50,000 supporters are required by the Constitution and the legislative branch for the submission of new laws, or amendment to existing laws.

The issue of increasing the number of women in decision-making has to start with the women themselves. If women are to play a leading role in allocating resources and benefits, they have to personally step out as candidates for both elections and political appointments.

Aspirations and commitments of women are necessary for change, but they are not sufficient. Many other facilitating factors need to exist – more enabling social and economic structures, the elimination of discriminatory laws, a decrease in sex role stereotypes in education and the mass media, and changes in men’s attitudes toward being more supportive of women’s involvement in the public sphere.

Box 17: Seeking Balance: Why Society Needs Women’s Perspectives

“Without question, women need to be leaders,” says Somsook Boonyabancha, Director of Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI). Society needs women in those roles.

“If we’re serious in creating space for women to have stronger roles in the decision-making process, we need a good facilitator to intervene,” says Somsook. “But it must be the right kind of intervention.” Somsook says funds provide pragmatic scope. “A good process is the community fund, which allows women to have more of a management and leadership role and lets them prove themselves. Let people adjust and accept the new roles. The change of relationship between men and women is only possible if women do it themselves. It can’t be imposed.”

With proper development, says Somsook, women can become leaders. “In development in general we need a balance of men and women at every level of government and society. We need to balance society, otherwise it will not develop properly.”
SUMMARY

The past two decades have witnessed the changing roles and status of Thai women, who, at present, comprise half of the Thai population of about 62 million.

The socio-economic situation of most Thai women has improved substantially as evidenced by improved levels of health, education, employment and income. In health, life expectancy of the population has increased with women having five years additional life expectancy than men; the infant mortality rate has decreased and the number of maternal deaths has been reduced. In regard to education, the female literacy rate has improved, although there are still more illiterate females than males. However, among university graduates, the proportion of females and males is about the same.

Women play an especially active role in the labour market, and make up nearly half of the population of 30 million economically-employed persons. The majority of women are employed in agriculture. However, due to urbanization, modernization and a changing economy, the percentage of women in the agricultural sector has dropped drastically in the past decade. About two million more women leave agriculture than men to seek employment in urban areas. These female migrants are found in different types of employment, primarily as domestic servants, hawkers, venders and factory workers.

The significant role played by women in the economic development of the country has recently been highlighted. The remarkable economic growth rate (averaging about 8% per annum before the economic crisis), has resulted from a rapid increase in exports of manufactured products and a booming tourism industry, can be substantially attributed to women, who form about 80-90% of the labour force in these industries. Despite the massive contribution to economic development, unfair employment practices and treatment of women workers still exist. Access to resources and control of benefits are still more restricted for female workers than for male workers.

During the past decade, women’s participation in politics and administration was under 10%. In local administration, the number of female village heads and sub-district heads increased slightly to around 2%. However, since the establishment of the Sub-district Administrative Organization in 1995, women’s participation in the above organization increased to 9%. In addition, some administrative positions (provincial governor, district officer, and sub-district officer) have been opened to women. In government service, the number of women executives increased, as did the number of female judges and attorneys.

Progress in the proportions of women in decision-making is best illustrated by the requirement of equal male and female participation in Village Fund Committees.
The amendment that stipulated this regulation was made possible through NGO campaigns. The barriers inhibiting greater and more equal participation of women in all spheres of national development include lack of education, training and skill development opportunities; lack of access to land, credit and technology; subordinate gender roles and stereotypes placed on women by the society; and gender bias in legislatures.

Throughout the years, efforts have been strenuously and continually made to increase the visibility of women in the development process and to advance the status of women through the strategic use of gender information and the establishment of networks and movements. Success has been satisfactory at one level, yet discriminatory practices against women are still prevalent in many areas. There is a long way to go before true equality can be achieved.

The most urgent message to be conveyed is that the objective of gender equality is not about creating a power struggle between men and women. It is about ensuring that resources and benefits are equitably shared among men and women. It is about helping men and women be more supportive of each other, and about strengthening families, communities, and the development of Thailand. It is about understanding the similarities and differences through different socialization processes of men and women, and taking them into consideration in the development of the whole society.

The importance of bringing a gender perspective in the formulation of policies, plans and programs needs to be further highlighted. Gender perspectives are still widely unrecognized and misunderstood. While many officials are sympathetic, gender issues and the empowerment of women are commonly viewed as political, and not as something central to national policy-making or effective development.

The ultimate challenge for the forthcoming years is not merely to put women in the mainstream but to change the mainstream to reflect equality and fair play for women. This requires the active participation of and collaboration among government agencies, political parties, pressure groups, the media and women’s activists.

All parties concerned at all levels have to join hands in developing appropriate measures:

The government has to take seriously the commitments and obligations it has made toward the conventions and laws at both the international and national levels. Policies to increase the number of women decision-makers need to be implemented within a stated time frame and closely monitored. Mainstreaming gender in all government’s development processes and activities is necessary. Long term strategies that must be formulated and implemented include: conducting public education, revising the educational curriculum to raise awareness about the importance of gender equality, and encouraging women to participate as equal partners in all development processes.

The political parties need to seriously consider affirmative action and make it their duty to raise the awareness of party members, supporters and candidates regarding the
significance of electing and appointing female decision-makers, as well as incorporating gender in their policies.

**Institutions and organizations** including the mass media need to amend or campaign for the amendment of discriminatory laws, to establish institutional mechanisms to ensure a more equitable share of resources, and to broaden gender awareness. At the very least, they need to support women who are ready to move into the decision-making arena.

More importantly, **pressure groups** have to campaign for changes in the images of women and eradication of existing gender stereotypes.

Committed collaboration under the democratic principle of the government, political parties, non-government organizations and the mass media - including the women themselves - will help ensure that gender will be integrated into the societal mainstream, and that the road to gender equality will be built and maintained by both men and women. That is the hope for tomorrow.
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