

# WOMIEN IN THAILAND



Thai girl weaving baskets.

Credit: CUSO

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Donna Davidson fonde son analyse de la situation de la femme en Thaïlande contemporaine sur les recherches et les entrevues qu'elles a menées au cours de son récent voyage dans le pays. Elle oppose la superbe des Thaïs aux réalités vécues par les femmes qui ne jouissent pas des privilèges de cette classe supérieure. Elle souligne la pratique de la polygamie ("femmes mineures"), la double norme régissant les comportements sexuels, les inégalités en matière d'éducation, et la prostitution comme facteurs clés de l'oppression de la femme. Certaines lois récentes, de caractère régressif, menaçant l'avenir de l'égalité, elle préconise l'éducation de la femme et le développement d'organismes féministes qu'elle pense être d'importants moyens pour remédier à la situation.

*"On the whole, the condition of women is better in Siam than in most Oriental countries."<sup>1</sup>*

It seems that Sir John Bowering's observation of 1850 is still true in Thailand today. Most feminists I spoke to attributed this to the relative economic independence of Thai women. Thai women have at least as much professional freedom as their North American counterparts. There are women doctors, lawyers, judges, businesswomen, board directors, bank managers, members of parliament, and senators. Fifty-one percent of the university professors are women. In 1980 women comprised 49.6% of the population and 49.84% of the work force.<sup>2</sup>

Father Bigandet, another early traveller, attributed the superior treatment of women in Siam to Buddhism: "In Burma and Siam, the doctrines of Buddhism have produced a striking, and to the lover of true civilization, a most interesting result – the almost complete equality of the condition of women with that of men."<sup>3</sup> I would tend to partially agree with Father Bigandet's sentiment. Until very recently, every Thai male was expected to become a Buddhist monk for some period of his life – even if it was for as short a time as two months. Fully devoting even a small part of one's life to a religion that stresses compassion, tolerance, and 'right action' must have some effect on one's behaviour. Also, in general Thai people still seem to take religion more seriously than North Americans. Most still make offerings regularly at temples, have Buddhist shrines in their homes, and spirit homes in their yards.

## Historical Background

There have been famous Thai women throughout history. In 654 A.D., the first ruler of the Mon Kingdom of Lamphoon was Princess Chamaderi. King Tilakarat (1441-85) sent his mother, Princess Mahadevi, to head an expedition against Phrai whose governor was also a woman, Theo Mehkun. Queen Chirupabha reigned over Chaing Mai from 1545-47 and from 1564-78. During the later part of the eighteenth century, two sisters, Thea Thepkasattri and Thav Srisoonthom successfully defended the island province of Phuket against the Burmese. When King Rama V (1868-1910) left Thailand to visit Europe he left his Queen in charge of the kingdom.

From the early history of Siam until very recently in Thailand, Thai women seem to have had a higher status in practice than in law. A man had complete authority over his wife or wives. She had to obey him implicitly, had no property rights and had to live with her in-laws. He could kill her without fearing punishment if he found her in the act of committing adultery.

According to the earliest record of women's roles in Siamese society (written by a wife of King Lithai (1275-1317) during the Sukhothai period), some of the laws afforded women a measure of protection. If a man severely mistreated his wife physically, his in-laws could drive him away and keep all his property because he had behaved badly and caused a divorce. In the event of divorce, goods acquired after marriage were to be divided into three parts: two parts belonged to the wife if she looked after the children and one part belonged to the husband. If a woman committed adultery, she had to be sold as a slave: half the money went to her husband and half to her parents.<sup>4</sup>

During the Ayudhya Period (1350-1767), women could be used as security when men borrowed money in lieu of paying interest. At the time of Rama I (1782-1809), a husband could sell his wife and children into slavery. Before 1868 women and buffalo were listed in the same category.

Polygamy was widely practised in Siam until well into the twentieth century. In 1805, the law recognized three kinds of wives: the principal wife; secondary wives, who had some inheritance rights; and slave wives, who had been bought from debt bondage and had no rights.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally marriages were arranged. It was felt that the institution of minor wives kept the family together – a 'safety valve' if the husband and wife could not get along – and gave a man sexual alternatives, thereby relieving him of the need to "force anyone against her will, thus losing merit."<sup>6</sup>

In 1868 King Monghut (Rama IV) made a law to ensure that a woman had to agree to the transaction before she could be sold. In 1869 he promulgated the first law which truly protected women's rights, forbidding forcing a woman to marry against her will. In 1874 Rama V abolished slavery; by 1905 all men and women were declared free. Education was made compulsory for both boys and girls in 1921. In 1935 polygamy was abolished and women were given the right to vote.

In 1977, International Women's Year, women received equal status with men. The sale of joint property now must have the consent of both parties. Both parties can obtain a divorce on the grounds of adultery. The law presently states that men and women must be given equal pay for equal work and guarantees women sixty days' pregnancy leave.

## Social Inequalities, Minor Wives, and Retribution

Even though it is illegal, polygamy still exists in Thailand: it remains socially acceptable for men to have minor wives (*mia noi*). Middle and upper class men consider having a minor wife (wives) a status symbol. A few lower class men have minor wives, but usually because two or more working wives help economically.

There are very few illegitimate children in Thailand because if a man accepts paternity for the children of his minor wife, these children have the same inheritance rights as those of his legal wife. However, minor wives have no inheritance rights. Sometimes the legal wife and the minor wives live in the same house. I was told that the average Thai woman would rather have her husband go to a prostitute than have a minor wife.

A few women in Thailand have a rather devastating way of getting even with their husbands for taking minor wives. In the last ten years there have been a number of incidents of women actually castrating their husbands. In the first publicized case, it was reported that the woman fed her husband's penis to the ducks. This

incident is now a standard joke in Thailand: a woman warns her husband to remain faithful by saying, "You had better be good, or I'll start keeping ducks." Now there are plastic surgeons who can sew penises back on to castrated men. I was told that the Crown Prince, who at the age of thirty already has a minor wife, and is not known for his graciousness, made an official visit to a hospital. His only question concerned this operation.

Despite their professional freedom, contemporary Thai women have much less social freedom than their Western counterparts. The double standard regulating socially acceptable behaviour for male and females is extremely strong. Polygamy aside, I was told that the expected sexual mores in Thailand are roughly equivalent to those of Victorian England. In a 1980 survey, ninety percent of both males and females expected their partners to be virgins at marriage. As in most societies, it is more traditionally acceptable for men to have illicit sex partners than for women. In 1979 two senators had an affair which caused a nation-wide scandal. Although both parties were married, the government, the opposition, and the public blamed only the woman and demanded her resignation from the Senate.

It is more socially acceptable for a woman to be a minor wife than for a single woman to be involved with a man sexually. A single woman's social life can still be held against her professionally. Although it is now socially acceptable for single women to live on their own, few do so because of financial and parental pressures. Some younger feminists plan to remain single (at least for the present) to avoid the special problems involved in Thai marriages. Even today in all classes of Thai society, during the marriage ceremony the parents of the groom actually purchase the bride with money. This practice and the fact that, historically, men were allowed to sell their wives no doubt re-inforces the idea of woman as property.

## Educational Inequalities

Even though most Thai women work outside the house, they do not have the same opportunities for advancement as men do. This is due to traditional prejudice and to their limited educational opportunities compared to men. As Thailand is a very poor country, only some children have the opportunity for further

education: if a choice has to be made in a family, it is the boys who receive the further education. Another reason for boys receiving more education than girls is that traditionally most formal education was given by the monasteries. This remains true in some of the poor rural areas. In 1970, the illiteracy rate for women was 25.2% as compared to 11.1% for men.<sup>7</sup>

### Economic Exploitation

Economic exploitation of Thai women seems to be the result of the extreme poverty of the country more than any other factor. The most flagrant example of exploitation is prostitution. The notorious widespread prostitution in Thailand today seems to be more a result of the Viet Nam war than any other factor. Unscrupulous people took the opportunity to make a great deal of money out of the American soldiers stationed in Bangkok. When the Americans left, they were replaced by male tourists and businessmen from wealthy industrialized countries – mainly Japan, Germany, Sweden and, more recently, the Arab countries.

It is estimated that five percent of all the female population in Thailand over the age of fifteen are selling their bodies. Approximately seventy percent of the prostitutes have venereal disease. Virgins, some not yet in their teens, are sold to the highest bidder for a very high price – as much as eight thousand *Baht* (four hundred dollars). Subsequent encounters bring about ten dollars from the client and, at the age of eighteen, the price may be as low as three dollars.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, Dr. Phasuk completed a very thorough study of fifty massage girls and prostitutes, which included going to the girls' villages and writing a personal history of each girl. One girl she studied said she cried for days after the loss of her virginity. She sent the money she received to her parents which they used for building a well. She left prostitution for a while, but her parents kept writing for money so she returned to selling her body. Most girls send at least one-third of their income home. As a prostitute, a girl can make ten or twenty-five times as much as she would at any other unskilled work. Dr. Phasuk says it is a cruel double standard which flatters men's pride by abusing women.<sup>9</sup>

As in most countries, prostitution in Thailand is surrounded by strong social taboos. However, it is viewed with more

tolerance because it is well known that almost all prostitutes are working only because of economic necessity. The historical fact that, until the end of the nineteenth century, men could legally sell women, makes the practice of parents selling their daughters into prostitution a much less serious crime to many Thais than it is to Westerners. Many girls who are not sold by their parents are lured to Bangkok with the promise of respectable jobs and good images. Often, the reality is that they are locked in a seedy hotel room which they share with eight to ten other girls and are beaten by pimps if they do not oblige the clients.

Incredible though it may seem, prostitution is illegal in Thailand. However, the police are extremely corrupt. Some prostitutes say that vice raids are more frequent at the end of each month as the police solicit bribes to supplement their incomes. A reliable source told me that one of his school friends is a police chief in one part of the city who makes thirty thousand U.S. dollars a month in bribes from the prostitution industry. This is in a country where the average yearly wage was \$433 U.S. in 1978.

Some countries, notably Japan, Germany and The Netherlands actually run sex tours to Thailand. A Frankfurt advertisement reads as follows: "Asian women are without desire for emancipation, but full of warm sensuality and the softness of velvet. Come to Thailand and the Phillipines to explore exotic Eastern flowers." In the past few years women's groups in Japan, Thailand and the Phillipines have been staging protests against sex tourism. A number of women's groups in Thailand wrote and presented a protest letter to the Japanese Prime Minister when he visited Thailand in 1980. Thai women's groups have protested against the lax attitude of the government as regards prostitution, too. In 1981 one high government official actually spoke of prostitution as a "necessary sacrifice" for improving the economy of the country. The women's groups sent him an open letter which said it "would be an insult to Thai women to perpetuate sexual oppression in this country."<sup>10</sup>

Another way Thai women are exploited is that they are used as cheap labour. Eighty to ninety percent of factory textile workers are women. They usually work for much lower wages than men and they have high illness rates, mainly caused by poor working conditions. Accident insurance is practically non-existent. Most fac-

tories hire women on a part-time basis so they do not have to give them the benefits required by law. Although there are laws to protect women labourers, most just accept poor working conditions and inequalities because they are afraid of losing their jobs. Workers are actively discouraged from forming unions. Women are employed by construction companies as frequently as men. They work long hours for very low wages. Often the companies prefer to hire women as they find them to be more reliable, harder workers.

Foreign men and multi-national companies from developed industrialized countries deserve a large share of the blame for the economic exploitation of Thai women.

### Specific Problems Related to Social Class

Most Thai feminists differentiate between the problems of middle and upper class women and those of rural and lower class women. The main problems of the latter are economic exploitation, job insecurity, and lack of educational opportunities. Because they work during the day and care for children and do housework in the evening, lower class women carry double work loads. Rural women are deprived of adequate health services. The major problems for middle and upper class women are the traditional social inequalities: minor wives, lack of social and sexual freedom – in general, a strong double standard. Advancement to important administrative posts is difficult.

### Major Problems and Future Directions

The lack of consciousness among Thai women themselves is a hindrance to improving women's status. Dr. Debhanom Muangman, Dean of Public Health at Mahidol University, said recently they had done a survey of women in medical school asking each if she would be willing to become a minor wife of a rich, middle-aged man. In their first year ninety percent said they would not, but in their last year ninety percent of the same women said they would! One feminist told me that most women just try to ignore social inequalities.

Another factor which may impede the women's cause is, ironically, Buddhism itself, which historically seems to have



Thai woman and son in Bangkok

Credit: CUSO

improved women's status. Feminists who loudly denounce chauvinism have not only the traditional male supremacy to fight, but are violating an important, ingrained code of social behaviour which punishes 'aggressive' behaviours. Another traditional belief that impedes progress is that the family unit, rather than the individual, is important. Women are seen as wives and mothers, but not as individuals. This idea is perpetrated by some of the women's groups and the Royal Family. On Mother's Day the Queen gives out many prizes in different categories, such as the mother who keeps the cleanest children and the mother who makes the most sacrifices for her children.

### Conclusion

Although much has been done in the past few years to raise the status of women, it is still an 'uphill' battle. Recently the government defeated a bill which would have allowed a woman to become a 'head-person' in a village. A bill for legalizing abortion, which had been passed by the Lower House, was defeated by the Senate. The government had included a development plan for women in their new Five Year Plan 1982-1986 but later, for lack of funds, decided to give it to private women's groups to implement. Obvious-

ly, the government does not see improving the status of women as a priority.

There are no women's studies programs in any of the universities in Thailand. However, a Women's Research Centre is being set up at Chulalongkorn University, the most prestigious university in Thailand. No doubt women's studies programs would help raise the consciousness of some women.

There are a number of women's organizations: The National Council of Women of Thailand, which has existed for thirty years and has branches in rural areas; the Thai Women Lawyers' Association, which is mainly responsible for the changes in law regarding women's status in the late 1970s; the Status of Women Promotion Group; the Friends of Women Group, which organizes consciousness-raising sessions, has staged protests against sex tourism and is considered quite radical by many Thais.

Feminists meet a great deal of opposition from the male population as a whole. One feminist said she does not find any difference in attitude between uneducated men and academics. An economics professor told me that when she talks about equal rights for women, Thai men say, "Those are Western ideas." Another economics professor said her male colleagues had tried to ridicule her by saying, "Maybe you should have an

emblem for your women's group. How about a duck and a knife?"

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Dean Barrett, *Girls of Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Publishing Co., 1980), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>*Development Plan for Women for the Period of Five Years 1982-86* (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, Office of the Prime Minister, Thailand), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup>Barrett, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Phannob Wati, *The Rise and Fall of Thai Women* (Bangkok, 1970).

<sup>5</sup>Sunantor, Setboonsarg, "Petticoat Power - But Traditions Do Die Hard," *Business in Thailand* (August, 1981).

<sup>6</sup>"Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand," in *Change: Women and Society*.

<sup>7</sup>Kattiya Karnasuta, *Education and Development Programs for Thai Women* (Bangkok: National Commission on Women's Affairs, 1980), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup>John Hall, "Our Sex Capital Image," *Focus* (Thailand: November, 1980), pp. 71-4; and "Latter Day Human Market in Bangkok," *The Sun* (Bangkok, February 8, 1981).

<sup>9</sup>*The Nation* (Bangkok, February 8, 1981).

<sup>10</sup>"Protest Letter from "Anti-Sex Tour Groups", *The Nation* (January 20, 1981).