

# Thai Women's Participation in Governance

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## **Abstract**

The paper examines the impact of the USAID's Sapan Program on women groups in Thailand. These groups are Voluntary Women's Group in Chiang Mai, Office of Health and Social Development (OHSD) from Khon Kaen, Sri Song Kwai Women's Group from Phitsanulok and Association of Muslim Women from Nakhon Si Thammarat (AMW), Nature Protection for Life Foundation in Ubon Ratchathani and Women for Peace from Yala.

Focus group interviews and key informants in-depth interview were conducted from October to November 2014 in order to understand the impact of the USAID's Sapan Program on women groups in Thailand. The results showed that despite the differences in age, economic status, level of education and religious of the women gathering together for the activities in each region, they have common interest in public work to help the society, women and children, and the underprivileged groups. They have the same opinion that women roles should not be limited for just domestic activities, women should also do social work with their abilities and according to the opportunities they might have. Although most women preferred to do social works without any political position involved, but some women started considering that holding position in local politics would allow them to take more important roles in public decision. Currently, the increasing number of women politicians at both national and local level in Thailand is encouraging more Thai women to take on a greater political role. Although the increase in women's participation in politics is modest, there are indications that women's participation in governance is bringing about a change.

**Key words** Women's Participation, Politics, and Governance

## **Introduction**

While empirical data about women in Thailand is often limited to women's formal political representation, this paper considers the definition of women's political participation not only in terms of 'formal' politics or the number of women who hold positions in formal decision-making. The paper aims to examine the situation of Thai women in political arena. A Thai feminist activistsaid 'Politics is life' or Kanmueng pen reungkhongcheevit in Thai by Kritsanaphuti (1997). This means that politics is not separate from life and therefore everybody is always engaged in politics. Currently, the importances of women are increasing in Thai politics. Statistics also show that at present more Thai women actively participate in politics compared to the past (Gender Equality Information Center, 2014).

Thai women's participations in politics are noticed in eight levels including participation at board levels as shown below.

1. Member of Political Party
2. Voters
3. Selected or elected Senators / MPs/ Minister
4. National Policy Planner/ Administrator
5. Executive Administrator/Director General in government and private sectors
6. Political Administrator at the local level organisations
7. Routine officer in foreign or international organisations
8. Executive /officer in Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)

(The National Commission on Women's Affairs-NCWA, 1995 -Chapter15:13).

In order to provide background of Thai women's participation in politics, this paper begins with showing some recent statistics of women participation in politics in both national and local levels. Although, I argue that politics exists in all spheres of social activity and Thai women's political participation occurs not only in electoral politics, however, it has no empirical evidence of Thai women's participation; especially in the informal political sector.

Thailand was changed from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 1932. The 1932 revolution transferred a great deal of power from the king and the noble elite to a class of men educated mostly in Europe. However, in the national elections from 1932 to 1948, no women were elected. The first female was elected to the parliament in 1949 (The National Commission on Women's Affairs - NCWA, 1997). Thus, data in the table will appear from 1949. The 15.08 percent of female Member of Parliament (MP) getting elected in latest election of 2010 is regarded as the highest number of women ever elected to the Thai House of Representatives. The percentage of women politicians has slightly increased from the 1995 election (Table 1). In addition, alongside with the national level, at the local level as well the number of women members in Sub-district Administration Organisation (SAO) are also increased (Table 2).

**Table 1 Sex of Members of Member of Parliament (1949-2010)**

Year of Election	% of Women	% of Men
1949	4.55	95.45
1951	-	100.00
1952	3.25	96.75
1953	-	100.00
1954	-	100.00
1956	-	100.00
1957/1	0.62	99.38
1957/2	2.56	97.47
1958	-	100.00
1969	2.73	97.27
1970	-	100.00
1971	-	100.00
1975	1.11	98.89
1976	2.51	97.49
1979	2.96	97.04
1980	-	100.00
1981	-	100.00
1982	-	100.00
1983	3.45	96.55
1986	-	100.00
1987	2.79	97.21
1990	-	100.00
1992/1	3.33	96.67
1992/2	4.17	95.85
1993	-	100.00
1994	-	100.00
1995	6.12	93.88
1996	5.60	94.40
2001	7.80	92.20
2004	10.60	89.40
2006	12.71	87.29
2010	15.80	84.20

Source: Gender Equality Information Centre (2014)

**Table 2 Sex of Members of Sub-district Administration Organisation (SAO) from 1995 to 2012**

Year of Election	% of women	% of men
1995	6.50	93.50
1996	7.93	92.07
1997	8.75	91.25
1999	9.14	90.86
2004	6.73	93.27
2008	13.19	86.81
2010	13.42	86.57
2011	14.78	85.22
2012	14.24	85.76

Source: Ministry of Interior (1999) and Gender Equality Information Centre (2014)

The numbers in both tables are interesting as women seem to have greater opportunities in politics. This is because in Thailand, in the past, women did not participate actively in formal politics. This was because politics was traditionally believed to be an arena only for men. A common phrase widely used in the country: ‘Phu chai pen chang thaw na, Phuying pen chang thaw lung’ which means men are the front legs of the elephant, women are the back legs. This phrase refers men as leader of society. However, the statistics above imply that women can also be leaders - not followers only as it used to be in the past.

Last year, my friend and I carried out research related to women in many places of the country in North, South and Northeast and we have also found that changes are now taking place in a context where Thai politics has generally been the domain of men. The study aims to understand the impact of the USAID’s Sapan (bridge in Thai) Programme on women groups in Thailand. There are many groups functioning under the USAID sponsored Sapan Program. However, this research conducted with only 6 groups. These groups are Voluntary Women’s Group in Chiang Mai, Office of Health and Social Development (OHSD) in KhonKaen, Sri Song Kwai Women’s Group in Phitsanulok, Association of Muslim Women in Nakhon Si Thammarat (AMW), Nature Protection for Life Foundation in UbonRatchathani and Women for Peace in Yala province (Mee-Udon and Donornbao 2014).

The initiation of USAID’s Sapan Program aims to empower women for political participation in conducting women-focused programmes. In 2011, Sapan Program supported Friends of Women Foundation and Voluntary Women’s Group in Chiang Mai to access to the needed information on women’s decision making policy, as well as leadership skills training in order to improve local women in local governance participation and their confidence. In 2012-2014, Sapan Program extended to cover a national network of 7 women-led organizations. It is composed of Friends of Women Foundation from Bangkok and the other 6 organizations mentioned earlier.

In order to encourage women to access to the Women Empowerment Fund’s policies launched by the Government Sapan Program promoted useful knowledge, necessary skills and information to women organizations. Those include women leadership on Budget Literacy, Good governance monitoring tools i.e. Community Scorecard. Sapan also developed female citizenship program, i.e. gender roles in public policies, public polices

development, project development, communication and facilitator skills and techniques and policy advocacy campaigns.

## **Findings**

The 6 women-led groups applied their knowledge of governance tools into their local governance monitoring such as the Voluntary Women's Group from Chiang Mai Participated in local meetings and forums of Budget Literacy and in Local Administrative Organizations' (LAOs) including accessing information for administration procedure and in local budget and development plans. Office of the Health and Social Development (OHSD) from Khon Kaen applied Social Audit onto LAOs' public health services delivery monitoring with significant public participation for co-improvement directions. Association of Muslim Women from Nakhon Si Thammarat (AMW) applied Citizen Charter to improve their local Day Care Centers to meet the best practices and results. Sri Song Kwai Women's Group from Phitsanulok employed the Community Scorecard to promote their Local Hospitals' services delivery making improvements on personnel competency, decreasing of the best services waiting time and the system. Nature Protection for Life Foundation in Ubonrathcathani promoted local, women-led groups to work on improvement of pipe water quality, improving road conditions and waste management employing Community Scorecard. In Yala, the Women for Peace Group promoted the quality improvement of the Day care Centers by Citizen Charter to have the greater quality of teaching process and teachers' capacity, Day Care Program improvement and the Centres' environmental and safety improvement.

Empowerment made to the above mentioned Women-led Organizations was extended to support the local forums of these women-led organizations to build public awareness and acceptance of the women roles in the public-monitored governance. Despite the differences in age, economic status, level of education and religions, women gathered together for the activities in each region. They have common interest in public work to help the society, women and children, and the underprivileged groups. They have the same opinion that women roles should not be limited for just domestic activities, women should also do social work with their abilities and according to the opportunities they get.

Although most women preferred to do social works without any political position involved, but some women started considering that holding position in local politics would allow them to take more important roles in public decision. Leaving the political issues for just men may result in no progress of Thai politics. Same problems would remain, such as, corruption and violence. Benefits from development projects would only be for political players and their parties. The people would not get the benefit from the development, as they should.

With USAID-funded Sapan Program over the past 3 years, changes noticed in the roles played by women in these areas. Firstly, they have perceived the knowledge of good governance and learned about good working system and the means to operate and monitor the work of various local organizations efficiently, such as: Social Audit, Community Scorecard, Citizen Charter and Budget Literacy for good governance. It would contribute to the development of local organizations that work for benefit of public more efficiently as people would get more opportunities to take part in public opinion about the work of each organization. Secondly, networking for women's groups in the nearby areas had been created and extended, which could be clearly seen from the case of AMW in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Women's groups from different regions had the opportunities to work with women's group of their surrounding areas that led to better adjustment, knowledge exchange with people

working in the same field, exchanging experience with similar problems. Knowing women from other regions also helped in broadening work culture. Thirdly, women obtained confidences and dared to participate in local politics.

Empowerment and promotion of women leaders to access to all necessary knowledge, techniques, skills and information increased participation of these women and their roles.

For instance, Women Groups' members in UbonRatchathani and Chiang Mai were elected as their communities' political leaders in their Sub-District Councils. The new female leaders have become the communities' inspiration and great encouragement. Fourthly, the agencies monitored by these women groups i.e. their Sub-district Administrative Organizations (SAOs), the Sub-District Administrative Organizations (SAOs), the Sub-District Hospitals, Day Care Centers in KhonKaen, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phitsanulok and Yala had improvements.

These women organizations recognized the importance of governance monitoring tools and process of increasing participation. This is because they assisted public to receive information and were able to feedback to improve government agencies' performances and administration accountability. The demand of women participation in governance monitoring has been obviously increased and demanded by localities on the similar issues.

## **The Impact of the Activities of Sapan Program**

### **1. Impact on the organizations which have been monitored**

1.1 The organizations, which have been monitored by the women-led groups, such as, Sub-district Administrative Organization, Sub-district Health Promoting Hospital, Children Development Center, in Khon Kaen, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Yala have considered the importance of using good governance tools and monitoring process as they could see the participation, the exchange of opinions and information between public sector and people sector. For example, in UbonRatchathani and Phitsanulok, the organizations have adopted the suggestions received to improve and developed their service systems and wanted the women-led groups to apply the monitoring process with other issues in the area.

1.2 Local Government Organizations have been stimulated to work efficiently as they were aware of being monitored by the people sectors. As a result, it gave impacts on better budget spending and administration to give benefits to public. For example, the case of local government organizations in Chiang Mai which has been monitored by women-led groups about their budget, the information about the budget allowed the women's group to know the rights and benefits they could have as well as to be able to negotiate with the local government administrators to allocate some of the budget for women's groups development in the area. Unless being aware of the information about the budget, it could have been used for other purposes. Therefore, monitoring process used by women's group helped reducing the misuse of the budget and making more benefits to the local groups.

1.3 The organizations were aware of the potential and extensive roles of women which were not merely for welfare, document or housekeeping works. Allowing women to participate more in local projects and join public forums to exchange information and opinions, helped to soften/ease the issues and made people in the community keen to participate in the activities as women were able to coordinate with people at all levels.

## 2. Impact on the Women-led Groups

### 2.1 Knowledge

Being supported by USAID, not only promoted the related activities in the area, it also gave the precedence to potential development of women working on good governance. So for the leaders from 6 women's organizations are concerned, they have perceived the information/knowledge on policy literacy, budget monitoring, tools for good governance development, such as, community score card, social monitoring, citizen charter and policy-driven campaign, as well as, the potential development by the Friends of Women Foundation about the equality between men and women, public policy development. Being the facilitator of the process and communication also enhanced the leadership for the women leaders of the 6 women's organizations to be able to extend their knowledge to local women leaders to be able to be exchanged lecturers on good governance promotion with the provincial agencies. For the local leaders, they had the understanding about good governance, were able to use the governance tools for monitoring the activities and apply to the issues they worked on, such as, the issue of natural resources in UbonRatchathani province.

### 2.2 Social Acceptance of Empowerment of Women Leader

Monitoring of the policies and local public services, the following tools included: social monitoring, community score card, budget monitoring and citizen charter, had been used systematically and the data obtained were used as the guidelines for decision making, discussion between the policy makers and the stakeholders. This allowed the people in the community to see the benefits of using the tools, the potential of women leaders as the process lecturer/in training process. This also built trust/confidence about the work of women leaders, the use of the tools and created work participation. For the case of Women's organizations in Nakhon Si Thammarat province where women had to work in the areas of different religions, this process created the collaboration between Buddhist women and Muslim women by focusing on the development of women empowerment to develop the community awareness of the participation in all policies at all levels equally. For the work of women's group in Yala province, a risk area, where women were hardly accepted by society, based on the social structure which has long been dominant by men, the field process to develop services system of Children Care Center to improve curriculum and safe care for children, and youths made the better changes in recognition of women's work by local leaders. There were more cooperation and participation in solving other women's issues.

These sayings of leader women in village clearly explain of this situation:

“ It's better to have more knowledge to get accepted also in society; not only in the kitchen.”

“From someone without any position in the community became someone who has been accepted by the community”.

### 2.3 Confidence of women leaders

Developing of women potential on policy literacy policy and ability to access the information has promoted women to participate in local politics in order to have the opportunities to work on the development of their area. For example, women leader groups of UbonRatchathani,



Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen had applied as candidates for the election of community leaders or members of Sub-district Administration Organization Council, and were elected as the community leaders, i.e. Headmen/Assistant of the Headmen of the villages, members of Sub-district Administration Organization Council, Management team of local government organization. This built the confidence for the women to enter into political work from seeing the issues themselves and encouraged other women leaders and women in the area. These are some women words.

“From zero/didn’t know what to say/answer. Now, I’m able to talk and think about the subjects better”.

“The participation in activities turned me from no one to someone just like spoiled coconut milk had been simmered and turned to be coconut oil”

### **3. Actual Model from Work and Movement of Women’s Network**

3.1 Network development of the collaboration of women’s organizations has promoted to exchange of knowledge network and power/movement sharing under “Thai Network of Women’s Organizations from 4 Regions to create Change”, with the objectives to: promote women’s access to policy at all levels, develop women’s abilities to step into leadership and expand women’s network involved in the development of governance at both local and national levels.

3.2 Empowerment leadership potential for women’s leaders including educating them in working tools have led these women leaders to step into local politics. Women leaders had confidence in follow up and negotiation the budgets for women developing in their local administrative organizations, which led to the prompt service management of local government for the better quality of life. These results have shown society about how important of the women roles in different perspectives are.

3.3 Management development strengthened the organizations to work in transparency standard. The women leaders with good governance process who managed organized system in all tasks, finance, and staff have been accepted from other governing sectors and outside funding.

### **4. Challenges in Promoting Women’s Monitoring Roles**

Although evidences above show an increase in the role of women in local politics, there are still a number of obstacles.

4.1 At the initial stages of activities, the organizations might not understand or wanted their operation to be monitored. It might take some time and need some tactics before being accepted.

4.2 In some areas, issues related to good governance might be involved with some area conflicts. It could be difficult and challenging. Working on those issues and areas would require people with courage and strong will as they might be threatened by tyrant group who might feel that the women could be their political competitors.

4.3 There are some deeply rooted traditional practices which men against women into political participation that can be seen from this saying.

“if the women became the head of the villages, how could they set up the tent or chase/catch the thieves?”

In addition, some women had many roles including domestic roles. They might not get the green-signal from their family to serve for social work entirely. Thus, women who wanted to do social services would need to have strong conviction and social ideology to keep their work constant.

4.4 The monitoring tools for good governance are new tools, so women have to learn from little success in each step of their work in order to build their confidence in their roles. However, in a case of the large budget governing project that covers wide areas may need more network of women organizations. This is because the study found that women leaders collaborated within governing sectors in their own local areas. Therefore, only a small number of women organizations now would not be enough to make extensive changes.

In conclusion, in order to develop and support women to get involved in good governance process in local community , it should be started with buiding awareness of their roles as citizen that women are important to be involved and in charge of their own policies. Strenght building in the network should be continued so that new women leaders will realise about the significance of participating in policy-making decisions at all levels.

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