Dutiful but Overburdened: Women in Thai Society

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It is a common sight in Bangkok to see women working— as food and vegetable vendors, factory and construction workers, shopkeepers, sales assistants or bus conductoresses. In the countryside, on the other hand, they tend to work as rice farmers and agricultural laborers. To support themselves and their families at home, many of the less educated women seek jobs abroad as maids, mail-order brides or prostitutes. The high visibility of Thai women and their high level of participation in the labor force, however, does not imply autonomy. The modern cash economy, introduced at the turn of the 19th century, together with contemporary socio-political factors have undermined their control over their own lives, especially among the majority of poor urban and rural women. Their work, particularly in the casual sector, which includes jobs such as market bazaar traders, self-employed vendors and farm workers, has been increasingly undervalued. Poor working women today are struggling to survive in a hostile urban environment.

Development processes, like capitalism, assume different structures depending on the historical, political and social context of the country in which they originate. An attempt is made in this paper to discuss the structure of economic development in Thailand, the shape it has assumed in social/class and regional terms, and the effects it has had on women. This paper shows that political institutions such as the monarchy and the state, and cultural institutions such as the kinship system and religion define the status of women differently and delegate them to varying degrees of power and autonomy. Due to politico-historical reasons, poor rural women are at a severe disadvantage in terms of education, health and employment. They suffer
physically and are forced to take low-paying jobs to survive, in addition to supporting their families.

Thailand today consists of 73 administrative provinces. Geographically, it is divided into four regions: the Central Plains, the North, the Northeast and the South. These regions have had differential access to various resources; hence, they differ in their level of prosperity and degree of development. Thailand is mostly rural; 86% of the population, approximately 44 million out of 51.6 million in 1985 (of which half were women), live in rural areas. While women constitute up to 46% of the total labor force, in rural areas the percentage is as high as 49%. About 12% of Thai women are illiterate (as compared to 6% of men), and only 8% of women are employers (in contrast to 13% of men). The number of unmarried women in the age range of 40-60 is as high as 26% (as against 9% for men). There were only 12 women out of a total membership of 335 members in the national legislature body from the July election in 1986.

Thus, though the conditions of Thai women vary among the four regions, in general they are more rural and less educated than men (most have less than four years of schooling, (Bovornsiri 1982). Their participation is proportionately higher in the labor force, but they are obviously under-represented in terms of economic ownership and excluded from the decision-making processes in society at large. But what these statistics do not show is the psychological and legal inferiority, and the poor working conditions of a large number of low-paid Thai women. Thai society seems to take an indifferent attitude toward the underprivileged position of Thai women as a whole which leads, for example, to a high level of tolerance towards women in the most disadvantaged part of the service sector—prostitution. A look into the cultural and economic history of Thai society, which has combined both egalitarian and non-egalitarian characteristics, helps explain the growth of such tolerance and its links to the deterioration condition of some women (Omvedt, 1987).

Thailand first emerged as a consolidated state in the 13th century. Until recently the interplay of three politico-cultural factors—the monarchy, Buddhism and matrilocality—played and effective role in separating women into two distinct strata:

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1 All the statistical data taken from Selected Indicators on the Situation of Women 1985 (A/CONF. 116/10) prepared for the World Conference in Nairobi, Kenya 1985.
2 Ibid.
the aristocratic courtier woman and the common peasant woman. This clear-cut stratification became diffused only in the late 19th century after the introduction of Western education and modernization, the resulting emergence of a white-collar class. As the economy became increasingly dependent on the world market, social disparity increased and gave rise to the beginning of a new middle class. Within this middle stratum, a small number of women enjoyed the freedom to choose from a variety of modern roles and careers, such as teacher, doctor and lawyer. Left behind were a large number of deprived and disadvantaged women who were channelled into the service sector, which included prostitution. Overall, however, most Thai women remained in the rural agricultural sector, as shown in Table 1, detailing employment distribution among women.

Table 1: Percentage of Employed Population by Industry, 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDUSTRY</th>
<th>F %</th>
<th>M %</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Forestry, Hunting &amp; Fishery</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction, Repair, &amp; Demolition</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, Storage, &amp; Communication</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining &amp; Quarrying</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, Gas, Water &amp; Sanitary services.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities not adequately described</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For centuries, the Thai peasantry enjoyed a relatively "free" and "easy" life. Most village customs, based on indigenous animistic beliefs, tolerated--and even encouraged--women's public mobility even after marriage (Dickinson 1963). The matrilocal and bilateral kinship system also supported women's "independence" (Potter 1970; Potter 1973). However, under the increasing hold of absolute monarchy, both
the feudal corvee system (which required mandatory labor)\(^4\) and the constant wars with neighboring kingdoms, especially Burma, depleted the male labor force in the villages. These factors indirectly forced peasant women to support the men. Their free-and-easy life came under increasing pressure as they were forced to shoulder the burden of subsistence-farm-production in addition to their household chores. Though burdened, however, peasant women continued to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. Their mobility was not restricted by such severe social customs as Purdah in India or foot-binding in China.

Although Buddhism placed a high value on motherhood, it undermined the esteem in which women were held by refusing them the right to become monks. The monkhood was not simply a sanctuary for the pursuit of other-worldliness (spirituality) ; the right to join the monkhood also had profound socio-economic implications. Before the introduction of Western education, Thai education was administered solely by the monasteries (and this is still the case in the more remote villages). Since women were unable to become monks and were considered "polluting agents" to ordained men, they were deprived of an education, even though a few women were taught to read and write at home by their more open-minded male relatives. Buddhism, therefore, was an avenue for men to leave behind the burdens of this world (family responsibilities and the corvee system). Since ordination was not class-specific and could be temporary, the monkhood was equivalent to an open university where all men could come and go at will and acquire literacy. A knowledge of the arts and medicine were "tools" and "accessories" to aid them in their quest for upward mobility. Buddhism encouraged women to be more active economically in order to support the Buddhist order and to gain merit, indirectly through men, in the hope of better rebirth (as a man).

In this context, Buddhism slightly undermined women's position in the matrilocal and bilateral kinship system that existed in most parts of rural Thailand. It is vital, therefore, to understand the paradoxical situation in which women found themselves. Under the kinship system women had freedom and authority, for example, to control the family purse strings and share in the decision-making in the household. However, the male-oriented feudal and religious system imposed an economic burden

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4 Until the 19th century, all the land belonged to the king, and every male peasant paid a "tax" in one of the following two ways. Either he gave his free labor by working for 3-6 months for the lord under whom he was registered, or as much as two-thirds of the produce from the land that he leased : one-third to his immediate lord and the other third to the king.
on peasant women. Women worked as hard as men, yet they remained subordinate to men (lords, husbands, fathers and monks, but not sons).\textsuperscript{5}

Aristocratic female courtiers had less physical autonomy and independence compared to commoners. Upper-class women played the relatively passive and decorative role of wife and mother in the patriarchal, polygamous system of the ruling elite. Such a role was crucial for the continuity, through inter-marriage, of the feudal system under an absolute monarchy. Also, these women were often exchanged as "gifts" among the royalty and nobility to cement political allegiances.

Efforts at modernization in Thai society started at the turn of the 19th century and began to change the character of urban life.\textsuperscript{6} In order to show the British and French colonizers that Thais were as civilized as Westerners and thus unworthy of colonization, a number of women belonging to the Thai elite were educated (Western style) in foreign languages and Western social manners. Such "proper" knowledge was crucial if this female elite was to support their husbands in their role as leader during the process of "nation building" (Vella 1980). It was social and legal reforms, such as these, as well as the rising aspirations among the emerging middle-class of bureaucrats and military men that eventually led to the removal of the absolute monarchy and its replacement by a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

This democratic phase created a demand for an educated labor force to fill the rapidly expanding administrative machine created by the central government. Since the number of educated people was low, educated women for the first time were recruited into the public sphere of polity in the 1930s, although most of the jobs that were available were clerical positions (Krannich and Krannich 1980).

From 1932-1960, amidst the power struggle among the new ruling elite, the Thai economy became increasingly dependent on the global market economy (Wantana 1982). From 1932 to 1947, amidst the power struggle among the ruling elite, Thai politics came under the influence of capitalism. After 1947, capitalism became the major means of production in Thai society under the full market force of

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\textsuperscript{5} Since women were mostly illiterate, a woman was alluded to as a buffalo compared to a man who was regarded as a human being (phu ying pen kway, phu chaii pen kon).

\textsuperscript{6} The efforts include some legal changes in polygamy during King Mongkut’s reign (1850-65), promotion of women’s education in King Chulalongkorn’s reign (1865-1912), advocacy of a public role for women under King Vajiravudh (1912-1927), and acceptance of women into the expanding bureaucracy at the beginning of constitutional monarchy in 1932.
export-oriented policies. The changes during the second period (1947-60) began with US intervention in 1950 which laid the foundations for national economic and social development. From 1957 to 1963, as Wantana (1982) records, Thailand became a country fully dependent on capitalism, albeit an "under-developed" one. Thus, within one century (1855-1960), Thailand had shifted from a "peripheral capitalist" to a "dependent capitalist" country.

The first two national development plans (1960-65 and 1966-71) strongly emphasized the building of infrastructure for industrialization and the export trade. The major sources of capital were derived from agriculture and foreign loans and investments. The surplus, however, was not reinvested in the rural agricultural sector. Instead, it was channelled into urban expansion by offering incentives (such as modern infrastructures, tax relief and an unlimited pool of cheap labor) to ensure high returns on urban investments (Phongpaichit 1982).

This urban-biased strategy had an unequal impact on Thai women. For the privileged few, equal access to modern education and employment enabled them to take advantage of ever-expanding job opportunities in the modern sector. Many well-educated urban women saw their career aspirations fulfilled and worked to keep abreast of a changing world. However, a large proportion of disadvantaged poor women still came from rural areas and were illiterate, since education in these parts continued to be dependent on Buddhist monasteries. The promotion of popular education after 1932 resulted in schools being established in some rural areas, yet they were unable to meet local demand either in terms of quality or quantity. Ordination was still a way to escape poverty and social deprivation for poor rural males (even though this was no longer an effective channel for upward mobility as before). The majority of the rural population—both men and women—had to work hard simply to survive because of the state's negligence in reinvesting the newly available surplus (for example, rice exports) in the depleted agricultural sector. The fact that the boundaries of the nation's forests were fast shrinking (from 71% in 1947 to 33% in 1977) limited free access to land, while the gradual penetration of rural areas by capitalism increased their appetite

7 "'(Thai women) have never heard of women's liberation but they already achieved it.'"(quoted from Della Denman, "Letter from Bangkok", FEER, 12 May 1983, p. 82). This statement implies the smooth entry of Thai women into the modern economic sphere, which was the second sphere to become open to women, the first one being their entry into the political arena after the 1930s. But both opportunities have proved to be very class specific and limited mostly to the urban sector.
for consumer goods. Poor peasants, particularly those in the North and the Central Plains, gradually drifted into tenancy, and debt.\textsuperscript{8}

The unequal distribution of income and public services between rural areas and the one dominant major city, Bangkok, made it a center of opportunity, education and employment, essential for upward socio-economic mobility. It acted as a magnet, drawing people from the countryside. Since the 1950s the influx of rural migrants has contributed to an annual increase of 5\% in the population of the capital city. Because rural women have a long tradition of being economically active in Thai society and of sharing economic responsibility in the family, they too joined the stream of migrants flocking to Bangkok in search of jobs. Between 1960 and 1970, the ratio of men to women migrating to the city shifted from 131:100 to 115:100.\textsuperscript{9} Women coming from the poorer regions of the north and northeast outnumbered men by ratios of 5:4 and 4:3, respectively. Women also exceeded men in the younger age range of 10-19 although the ages of most migrants were concentrated in the 15-24 age bracket (Phongpaichit 1982).\textsuperscript{10}

The sex and age patterns of migrants reflect the rapid movement of a young, uneducated females in the labor force from agriculture to the modern urban sector.\textsuperscript{11} But the modern industrial sector has not expanded proportionately to absorb this ever-increasing supply of cheap labor. In 1970, about 68\% of unmarried female migrants under the age of 25 were employed as service workers, in the form of maids,  

\textsuperscript{8} Tenancy is not a problem for all the four regions. Since the north and the central plains are relatively more fertile than the other regions, the land there has been subjected to consolidation for the production of cash crops for export, such as rice, rubber, and maize.

\textsuperscript{9} The reasons for migration varied. According to the 1977 survey conducted by the National Statistical Office, 70\% of migrant women came to Bangkok to find jobs, 22\% to accompany the heads of their households, and 8\% to continue their schooling. (Quoted by Suwanlee Piampiti 1982, p. 126).

\textsuperscript{10} Among the mass of in-migrants, their rate of participation in the labor force was higher than that of the total population in Bangkok (Piampiti 1982). Among the female migrants, 80\% of the active labor force belonged to the age group 11-19 as compared to 25\% for the total population. Their level is also high in the other important working age ranges of 20-29 and 30-39—73\% and 68\% respectively, in contrast to 59\% and 60\% of the total number of females in Bangkok. The pattern for male-migrants is the reverse of that for females. The rate of economic participation is highest in the 30-39 age group (migrant : total males 97\% vs. 97\%), followed by those between 20 and 39 (91\% vs. 79\%) and then by those in the 11-19 age bracket (72\% vs. 23\%). The rate within the 40-59 age group is still high for males (73\% vs. 93\%) but is markedly lower for females (2\% vs. 49\%) (NSO 1978).

\textsuperscript{11} The migration of single women is very much a Southeast Asian or Thai phenomenon, see Pawadee Tongudai 1982.
cooks, and waitresses, while a further 17% were engaged as production workers and laborers (Smith and Crockett 1980). Apparently, migrant women today either risk unemployment in an alien city like Bangkok, or, if they are lucky, get manual jobs or lower management positions which are poorly paid (Meesook 1980). In theory, the increasing level of participation in the labor force by migrant women in urban areas together with their continued employment in rural agriculture may be thought to have contributed to the impressively high rate—in general—of female participation in the economy. But in practice, being ill-equipped in both urban and rural areas, they are concentrated mostly in jobs with low pay and little security, as shown in Table 2.

### Table 2: Percentage of Employed Population by Occupation, 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>F %</th>
<th>M %</th>
<th>TOTAL %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmer, Fishermen, Hunter, Logging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miner, Quarrymen &amp; Related Work</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Workers</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkers, Pedlars, Newspaper Deliver.</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts., Production process, &amp; laborers</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailor, Dressmaker, &amp; Rel. Workers</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter, &amp; Rel. Workers</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Process, &amp; Beverage Workers</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service, Sport, &amp; Recreation Workers</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, Technical, &amp; Rel. Work.</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical Work</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administ., Execut., Managerial work.</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport., Communicat. Workers</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not classified by occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The occupational stratification of women in both urban and rural areas has further differentiated them especially in terms of income and status, into sub-sets of advantaged and disadvantaged. Consequently, although all women share the common problems of social and economic discrimination, their specific problems vary within each of these two sub-sets.
The few advantaged urban women face problems similar to those of their Western counterparts in terms of having to shoulder the dual burden of career and motherhood, as well as in terms of their individual rights. But because of the less rigid division of labor (an inheritance from the peasant tradition), Thai women usually fare better than most women in the West. They are accepted professionally once they have proven their abilities. Nonetheless, a strong family socio-economic background has been a key factor to success for many Thai women. The contemporary position of women in this category has improved significantly compared to that which existed in the early 20th century, primarily in the areas of economic independence. Sexual prejudices unfortunately have not been totally removed since laws and government regulations continue to favor males.

Recently, several women from the urban elite have become increasingly active in the political arena as evidenced by the increasing number of women candidates in the last two general elections. In contrast, advantaged rural women are still bound by tradition and subject to male prejudice. Through their perseverance, dedication and communication skills, however, some have moved into positions of local leadership such as village head and Kamnan (sub-district chief).

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12 For example, Sirilak Ratanakorn was once president of the Bangkok stock exchange (the Security Exchange of Thailand) and Sukanya Chollasuek (pen name Krisna Asoksin) a winner of the 1985 SEA Writers’ Award.

13 Sriswang Phuapongpat, in an interview, comments that women who have successfully reached the upper echelons and become “equal” to men have done so because they have had a better opportunity to develop their potential and skills rather than just being exceptionally capable (“Viewpoints”, Friends of Women Magazine, 1 (3):10, 1983). For additional examples of “successful women” see also Della Denman “Letter from Bangkok” FEER, 12 May 1983, p. 32, and “Six Thai Women’s Success Stories” Bangkok Post, 11 September 1986, p. 10).


15 See Bangkok Post, 11 September 1986, p. 10 as #10. The amendment to the Local Administration Act (No.6) of 1982 has enabled women to be elected to local leadership positions. There were 8, 163, 23, 65, and 340 women respectively, holding such positions as sub-district chief, village chief, sub-district doctor, assistant sub-district chief, and assistant village chief. (Women’s Development in Thailand, National Commission on Women’s Affairs, 1985, p. 71). According to the 1986-survey of the Local Department of Administration, Ministry of Interior, the numbers have increased to 16, 288, 32, 84 and 523 but still there are no woman heads at the provincial and district levels.
For disadvantaged women, the main problem is a combination of long deprivation, primarily in education and in their standard of living. Deprivation, in terms of education and training, limits women’s potential. Illiterate women tend to have a low sense of self-esteem and very little self-confidence in public, whereas sub-standard living conditions, particularly malnourishment during early life contributes toward the suppression of their intellectual development. This mental “underdevelopment” inhibits their thinking and limits their worldview as well as the way they perceive life beyond the daily routine of their lives.16 Similarly, traditional Thai culture, partly rooted in the Buddhist concept of the accumulation of merit and the Law of Karma encourages Thai women, particularly those from rural areas, to view men as their superiors. Women see themselves as disadvantaged and less worthy. They need money as a means of showing gratitude to their parents for bearing and raising them, as a way of taking care of their younger siblings and giving them a wider range of opportunities, including education.17 This selfless- or family-centered internalization prevents them from forming groups in order to express their needs and enhance their bargaining power.18 The situation is exacerbated when they migrate to urban centers where they have no family or kinship base and have to struggle alone in an unfamiliar social environment.19

Those who migrate to the city very often end up in urban slums. The majority of female migrants under the age of 25 become maids. As maids, their monthly wages are very low (about 500 to 1,000 baht or $20 to $40), and their rights and “security of employment” are not safeguarded by the labor laws. Often, however, being a maid is just a path to upward socio-economic mobility, a transition for her either into

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16 See Sanitsuda Ekachai “Why Grandma Must Learn about Feeding the Baby”, Bangkok Post, 16 September 1986, p. 34.
17 Sukanya Harintrakul discusses the belief in the accumulation of “merit” and the decision of poor and disadvantaged rural women to become prostitutes, FEER, 1983; Far Eastern Economic Review, January 5, 1984, p. 39.
18 For a detailed analysis see “Working Condition of Women Workers and their Participation in Trade Union”, ACFOD Newsletter, July-August, pp. 5-9.
19 The plight of the rural/urban working poor (woman) has been discussed in Voices from the City by Susan Throbeck (1986). She talks about the everyday objective conditions faced by women, such as street vendors, who are trying to survive in an economically (and probably socially) hostile environment. It is a struggle for a poor, unskilled female to survive in an uncaring world where she is divorced from the native (village) social network. For example, there is the harrassment by the police, the scarcity of materials with which to work, the constant search for whatever, the chronic lack of money and the feeling of insecurity.
industry or to other jobs in the middle-range of the service sector (Piampiti 1982). In this effort some do succeed, but the overall conditions in which they live show no marked improvement.

Worsening rural conditions in rural areas in terms of land availability, employment opportunities and self-awareness are the main problems facing most rural women. For those in urban areas, in addition to congested living conditions, sex crimes, poorly paid jobs, and an unhealthy working environment are readily discernible facts of life. These problems are further exacerbated by the increase in the rate of certain types of social violence such as wife-beating and rape. The government’s policies, oriented as they are toward the export and industrial sector; the legal system and prevailing social values, which tend to favor males, have been of little help. Though several private women’s organizations are beginning to provide services to disadvantaged women and represent them by voicing their concerns, one has to look carefully into the history, function, and efficiency of these institutions. These NGOs have not sprung up overnight, nor have all Thai women, historically speaking, been mere passive victims of oppression. They have attempted to organize themselves and participate in a given cultural context; to use whatever means and public opportunities that are available to them and turn them to their advantage. In future studies, they might, in fact, trace the historical evolution of women’s participation in Thai society.

Summary

Before modernization, Thai peasant women were relatively free and economically active, whereas women members of the aristocracy enjoyed an economically secure, but passive life. The development processes have had a positive impact upon upper-class women by giving them opportunities to pursue an education and a career; upon lower-class women, on the other hand, they have had an adverse effect. The majority of rural women are low-skilled, and less educated, and have little access to the job market or the political arena. They end up working in low-paying jobs and in the service sector. Male-dominated institutions have generally been

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20 Women are considered to be elements of corruption and a lower form of humanity. For example, women—even the Queen—are not allowed to touch the image of the Emerald Buddha, or certain Buddha images for fear that these will lose their potency or protective power; women’s under-garments are hung at a lower level than those belonging to men; a coward is teased as “a woman-faced creature” (nhar tau mia), and some rural people still believe that “a man that pounds his own rice will never have enough to eat as long as he lives”, etc.
insensitive to the worsening conditions borne by poor women. Freedom from violence and access to opportunities in the areas of employment, health, and education are the main problems facing the majority of poor Thai women whether from rural or urban areas.

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Vella, W.F. Chaiyo.  

Wantana, Somkiet  