

While there are no legal restrictions on their political participation, women generally are underrepresented in national politics, especially at senior levels. There was essentially no change in the number of women assigned or elected to positions of leadership. There are 15 women among the 264 members of the House of Representatives; in the 200-member Senate, 21 Senators are women.

Of the Parliament elected in 1996, there were 22 women among the 393 members of the House of Representatives. On average less than 10 percent of Parliament members have been women; however, this figure has risen steadily. Following the resignation of one woman from the Cabinet to compete in the election for Bangkok Governor, there are two women in the 48-member Cabinet. On average approximately 5 percent of Cabinet members in recent years have been women. Although over half of civil service employees are women, few hold senior positions.

In local government, substantial changes occurred after 1982, when the Local Administration Act allowed women to take up the post of village head and sub-district head. Although the proportion of female village heads in 1996 was only 1.6 percent it had risen from 0.7 percent in 1986. The 98.4 percent of male incumbents who were elected before 1992 (ten years or more since the Act came into being), will remain in their position until the retirement age of 60 years, thus progress toward greater gender equity will be slow.

Participation of women in village councils is low because public representation is perceived to be a masculine domain, and because business meetings are often held outside the village and late into the night, making it more difficult for women to attend. Since important economic decisions are made by the council, such as the location of a new well or the selection of representatives from the village to take part in training programs on new farming technology, women's interests are adversely affected by their low representation.

There are several other structural and cultural barriers to women's participation in local government. The previous exclusion of women reinforced the idea that local government was appropriate only for men. There is a cultural preference for men to hold positions of power that entail decision-making, and women tend to be excluded from the political and patronage networks that dominate public life at all levels in Thailand. Other factors include the lower education levels among women in the past, and the greater demands of household management placed on women, especially those in low-income rural households.<sup>2</sup> However, women are becoming increasingly active in "grassroots" political movements, such as the Assemblies of the Poor, and small popular movements seeking to gain legal recognition of their land-ownership rights in the Northeast.

In 1994, another door was opened for women's participation in local administration with the passing of the Sub-district Council and Sub-district Administrative Organization Act, under a decentralization policy (one sub-district consists of about eight villages). Elected officials will gradually replace appointed ones, who are almost all male. Government agencies on the development of women and women's NGOs have been campaigning for and training women to run in these elections. Female candidates now represent on average 10 percent. In the last election, they represented 0.8 percent of those elected.

The Constitution has six gender-related articles designed to provide women with equal rights and protections, but some inequalities in the law remain. A man may sue for divorce on the grounds that his wife committed adultery, but a woman faces the additional legal burden of proving that her husband has acknowledged publicly another woman as his wife.

Women have equal access to higher education, and more than half of university graduates each year are women. However, police and military academies (except for the nursing academy) do not accept female students, although a significant number of instructors at the military academies are women.

Thai women make up 47% of the formal work force, the highest in the Asia-Pacific region. They are in agricultural, trade, service and manufacturing jobs, and shifting from agricultural to urban employment. They hold an increasing share of professional positions. Women are able to own and manage businesses freely. But whether women are

owners or workers in all sizes of business, few are still in decision-making positions, facing persistent cultural, attitudinal and legal barriers.

Although government regulations require employers to pay equal wages and benefits for equal work regardless of gender there is a significant gap between the average salaries earned by men and women because women are concentrated in lower-paying jobs. In practice women also receive lower pay for equal work in virtually all sectors of the economy. Discrimination in hiring is also common.

However, improved media coverage and public awareness of women's issues has improved, and a permanent National Commission for Women's Affairs has been formed.

The Constitution includes an article that specifies that one-third of the members of the new National Human Rights Commission be women. The Women and Constitution Network, a league of 35 women's organizations, advocates for legal reforms to address legal inequities in the treatment of women. It continues to play an important role in securing the inclusion of gender equality clauses in legislation that create new government organizations mandated by the 1997 Constitution.

Domestic abuse continues to be a serious problem affecting the welfare of many women; reliable reports indicate that domestic abuse occurs across all social classes. Specific laws concerning domestic violence have not been enacted. Spousal and child abuse are covered by assault provisions in the Criminal Code, but rules of evidence often make prosecuting such cases difficult. Police do not enforce laws against such violence vigorously, and domestic violence often goes unreported because many victims and authorities continue to regard domestic abuse as a private, not a legal, matter. NGO's supported programs designed to aid victims, including emergency hotlines, temporary shelters, counseling services, and a television program designed to increase awareness of domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, and other women's issues. The Government's "one-stop" crisis centers in state-run hospitals established to care for abused women and children continued operation but faced budget difficulties.

Under the Criminal Code rape is illegal. However, a husband may not be prosecuted for spousal rape. In 1998 the Government proposed changes to the Criminal Code that would redefine the term rape to include marital rape. The proposed changes were pending at year's end.

According to credible sources, rapes and domestic assaults are underreported, in part because law enforcement agencies are widely perceived to be incapable of bringing perpetrators to justice. Since 1994 police have sought to change this perception and encourage women to report sexual crimes through the use of teams of female police officers that operate in metropolitan Bangkok police stations, with a total of 20 female investigators. The police expanded this program to three provinces by adding an additional 9 female officers.

Prostitution is illegal but flourishes. It is culturally ingrained and often is protected by local officials with a commercial interest in it. Trafficking in women and children is a serious problem. Government and NGO estimates of the number of women and children engaged in prostitution vary widely. Many NGO's and government departments report a figure of 200,000 persons, which is considered a conservative estimate. This figure includes children under age 18 and foreigners. In border areas, there were reports that women were forced into prostitution, but the number of such cases is difficult to determine. The majority of prostitutes are not kept under physical constraint, but a large number labor under debt bondage. The 1996 Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act makes child prostitution illegal and states that customers who patronize child prostitutes are subject to criminal sanctions. Parents who allow a child to enter the trade also are subject to criminal sanctions, but prosecutions remained low. NGO's and government agencies provide shelter, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs for children and women involved in the sex industry.

The 1998 Labor Protection Law made sexual harassment illegal for the first time, but covers only persons working in the private sector. NGO's claim that the term is vague and that such ambiguity makes the prosecution of harassment claims difficult. No sexual harassment cases were prosecuted under the act during the year. ❖