CHAPTER III

TRANSFORMING ROLE OF THAI WOMEN

Women in Thailand from a comparative perspective have suffered less discrimination and marginalization than women in many other parts of Asia. According to Amara Pongsapich (1997: 15) because of traditional system of bilateralism (status of women vis-à-vis men) with matrilateral bias (ambiguity and non-unilineal characteristics observed due to the multiple dimension of the system involving descent, inheritance, residence and authority), the dominance of men in Thai society in particular has not been as strong or as bad as could have been. When compared to East and South Asian societies, this is also true of other Southeast Asian societies in general. However, this does not mean that Thai women are free from discrimination in the country. Their roles have changed and transformed over time due to both internal and external influences. To understand the stages of transformation of Thai women, it is necessary to understand their roles and status in the history; and how and what influences have lead to transformation in these roles and status over time.

Traditional Gender Structure of Thai Society

According to Neher (1979:87), Thailand is divided into four natural regions: the North, Northeast, the Central Plain, and the Southern Peninsula. The regional variations - geographic, economic, ethnic, and political - act as the centrifugal forces that keep the country unified and integrated. These variations, however, are balanced by similarities that transcend the regional differences and make some nationwide generalizations possible. Along with these, the available resources and data on contemporary social structure also indicate that in rural Thailand, patriarchy is not very prevalent. Among lowland Thais, although families appear to be bilateral or cognatic, they follow the
practice of matrilocal (or uxorilocal) residence. After the marriage, the husbands come to reside with their patrilineal relatives (Pongsapich 1997:9).

In the Southern part of Thailand, Pataya Saihoo, it is noted that according to the Adat, (as majority of the population is Muslim) equal rights to inheritance are prevalent to both sons and daughters. In some way, it is indicated that in a family of the southern part of Thailand both husband and wife have their own private property.

In Northern Thai villages, Sulamith Potter (1977) suggested a distinction between social systems which is female-centered from a matrifocal social system. The system contrasts vividly with matrifocal system where matrifocality means that the women has more authority, influence and responsibility than her husband, and at the same time receives more affection and loyalty. Even in Northeast, Chai Podhisita summarized the relationship between men and women of same generation as well as inter-generationally. Matrilocality in the Northeast presents a mode of intergenerational succession of land and jural authority. Women are the key members of the household through whom the majority of the household is obtained and regulated. Family patterns of the Central plain conform with what has been observed in Northeast and Northern Thai villages.

Traditionally, women participated equally with men in agriculture, often outnumbering them in trade. Any restrictions like tradition of physical confinement like foot-binding in China or Purdah in India and other conservative Muslim populated countries to restrict women’s visibility and mobility in public are absent in Thai society. Generally Thai women have been more visible, mobile and active than others. Therefore, it is widely

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2 In social anthropology, matrilocal (or uxorilocal) is a term referring to the societal system in which a married couple resides with or near the wife's parents, thus the female offspring of a mother remain living in (or near) the mother's house, thereby forming large clan-families, typically consisting of three or four generations living in the same place.

3 A patriline is a line of descent from a male ancestor to a descendant (of either sex) in which the individuals in all intervening generations are male. In a patrilineal descent system (= agnatic descent), an individual is considered to belong to the same descent group as his or her father. This is in contrast to the less common pattern of matrilineal descent.

4 The term matrifocal, or its synonym, matricentric, simply means mother or female centered and can be understood to designate a domestic form in which only a mother and her dependent children are present or significant. Adult males in the capacity of husbands and fathers or of brothers and mothers brothers are either absent or, in some formulations, present but marginal to family life.
believed that women in Thailand enjoy freedom in many fields like their strong bargaining position within the household and the control and use of skills and resources, their primary roles in money management. But that does not mean and translate into any specific power or privilege. Moreover, their decision-making does not extend outside the family. In the community, in village society and public matters, they are effectively ignored. They are largely excluded from the political process and formal political structures and their active work force participation is restricted to the lower levels of the market. The higher positions of control and power are monopolized by men (Sen 2004:93).

On the other side, in a Thai family, a daughter is valued as an important member for the domestic chores especially taking care of her younger siblings. Daughters are the one who generally care for their elderly parents. If she is living away from home, a daughter will commonly send money to support her parents. Each of these practices enables women to repay debts of gratitude to parents and win merit points for the parents within the context of Theravada Buddhism. Her status in the family remains comparatively high as a consequence since without the dedication of a daughter both the daily needs and the spiritual needs of the parents would not be met (Limanonda 2000:249).

Regarding education, traditionally, boys were sent to wats (monasteries) from a basic education while girls were kept at home and trained in domestic skills. With the implementation of compulsory education for both boys and girls from the ages of 7-14 by the government in 1921, the traditional trend has changed. However, by studying the illiteracy rate the situation has not improved much as the illiteracy rate remains consistently higher among women than men.

Regarding gender structure in peasantry, especially those in the North and Northeast, there is the matrilocal and bilateral kinship system. Both kinship arrangement and economic participation gave peasant women a certain degree of power as well as economic and emotional support, and their authority increased when they became mothers. Women of the royal and noble families were subjected to strict patriarchal
control in their roles and behaviours and women were not independent economically (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1997:90). This traditional structure, however, began to change in the mid-19th century when in 1857, in order to preserve its independence, Thailand yielded to the British colonial pressure and signed the Bowring Treaty for trade which opened Thai economy to the world market and led to many stages i.e. shifting of economy from subsistence to commercial, increasing centralization of bureaucracy, burden on people through taxation, increasing the level of colonization. This internal colonization also meant the imposition of patriarchal inheritance law and the loss of women’s status. Feudal social relations of production in society at large did not change.

From available resource, it is quite confusing to understand the position of Thai women in the society i.e. at one point they were praised as they are enjoying equal status as men and on the other hand patriarchy still prevails and women are treated as second class citizen. Study of the social structure, religious influence and traditions and customs in Thai society will make us understand the status of Thai women in the past more clearly.

**Religious Influences**

Religion is considered to be a crucial determinant of family customs and practices and remains very important in legitimizing patriarchal family ideology. Over seven hundred years ago, Buddhism was introduced to the region, which influenced the spiritual and everyday life of the people. Approximately 95 percent of the population has faith in Buddhism. Other religions and faiths like Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, are also openly practiced and protected under the Constitution (UN World Population Prospect 2004:1075). Theravada Buddhism is the prominent religion in Thailand and it continues to exert a strong influence over social values, codes of ethics and day-to-day behaviour. Buddhist teachings include principles of ‘hierarchical order’ that influence ‘superordinate and subordinate’ social relationship. This understanding of social hierarchies has helped minimize discrimination based on sex and has enabled women to hold higher places in the family that would be possible in a Confucian society, for example, where social hierarchies explicitly include sex (men and women) as well as age (Limanonda 2000:249).
In the society of Thai especially those in the earlier periods, people generally believe in *karma*, which signifies the good and bad deeds in one's former lives that are thought to bear on the condition of one's present life. There is an old belief which shows that men were viewed as the better gender than women i.e. a man who committed adultery would, after his death, be sent to hell to be severely punished and after the suffering in hell he would have to be born a women for 500 lives and a transvestite for another 500 lives before being born a man again. Participation of women in worship has always been supported by religious practice. The activities of sons and daughters are clearly practiced in the religion of Thai society. Sons can perform this act of filial gratitude by joining monasteries and becoming monks. However, this avenue is not open to women. This practice of exclusion of women does not indeed imply that men have superior status to women. Daughters have other mechanisms for repaying debts of gratitude to parents that are equally as valid. In the Thai society as mentioned above, generally a daughter takes care of their old parents.

*Thai Social Structure*

*Man is padi.*

*Woman is rice.*

Traditional Thai proverb

According to this traditional Thai proverb, men and women in the traditional society are complementary to each other. Most of the available studies on Thai women reveal the equal status of the wives to their husbands in the Sukhothai period of the Thai history. Since ancient times, roles have been assigned to men and women in different ways. The male roles were “the breadwinner, the head of the family, the ruler and the protector of the country,” while the women “looked after the home, the children and the men folk and managed the family budget” (Busakorn Suriyasarn 1993).

In the traditional Thai society, the role of a woman is to take care of her husband and be totally obedient to him. It is known from the fact that most men in high society had
several wives, the number of whom was considered an indicator of the husband's socio-economic status. Thai women have good manners, love to take care of their families and are followers of their husbands. This has always been the stereotype of Thai women. In Thailand, today, women go to work like men and many are promoted to leaders in organizations. Many of them are more self-confident in the working world but at the same time do not neglect their families and doing household chores.

According to Sunthon Phu, a famous Thai poet who was designated by the UNESCO a Classic Poet of the World in 1986 describes the duties of a good wife in a literary work called “Exhortations to Women” (Suphasit Son Ying) as:

_A wife should show her respect to her husband every day. When the sun sets, she will go anywhere but prepare the bed for her husband. When the husband goes to bed, she krap him at his feet (by raising the hands pressed together at her chest and prostrating herself at the husband's feet as a Thai way to show her high respect). In the morning, she wakes up before him to cook food and prepare all things for him. When he has breakfast, she sits beside him to see whether he wants anything that she can bring to him. A good wife will not eat before husband._

An edict promulgated in 1861 stipulated that men had right to have several wives. No matter whether women were born in high or low society, they all had a lower status than men. Women in high society were protected by law better than those in the lower ranks. For example, though they were regarded as possession of their husbands, their husbands had no right to punish them severely. However, compared with men, the ladies were still in a far inferior status. Regarding the ordinary women, they had to do household chores and work in the field since men at that time were required to leave home either to do labour or guard the capital for about 4-6 months a year. Thus, when the husbands were out, their wives had to bear the burden of earning a living. They had to do farming, weave cloth for their family members and looked for some odd jobs to gain some income (Traditional Thai Women 2009: 5/7). Therefore, it is said that Thai women are very active in almost every field though they are not equally treated with men in the society. It is showed by their social structure.
The Thais are very conscious of their position within a hierarchy (Kapur-Fic 1998:47), be it family, place of work or business. Boundary lines are deep and clear and no one is allowed to overstep them, the behavior of those who do it not accepted, inviting retribution. Hence, this form of discrimination among Thai is extremely prevalent. In a society where maintenance of hierarchy is strictly followed, the survival of women in an equal status with their male counterparts is very difficult to exist. However, Thai women enjoyed greater share of liberty as compared to other women of Southeast Asian countries.

However, it is important to note that despite women’s oppressed status as highlighted in the social structure, the fact that Thai society (Busakorn Suriyasaran 1993) is a “quasi-matrilineal society”, emphasizing a matrilocal residence rule made women not fully dominated by men. Empirical evidence from several areas in Thailand suggests a norm of uxorilocal and matrilocal residence from early time until today.

**Thai Traditions and Customs: Family Lineage, Inheritance and Marriage System**

From the available facts, a clear picture of different treatment towards gender in the society is visible. One example that shows the different attitudes of people of former times held towards a man and a woman is that when a baby was born, and if it was male, a slate and a pencil would be placed beside the baby, but if a female, a needle and thread would be put there instead. This reflects the different expected roles of a man and a woman. The former are expected to become a man of knowledge and the latter a good housewife. When grown up, a boy was sent to study at a temple but a girl stayed at home and learned to do house chores. A Thai saying indicates the importance of the ability to cook for a woman — “the charm at the tip of a ladle makes a husband love his wife all of his life.” This saying shows that cooking is a significant duty for a wife (Traditional Thai Women 2009: 5/7). Besides that, the use of family names (Limanonda 2000:250) as surnames has only been adopted since the 1931 Royal Decree. Individual and community identities in Thailand do not revolve around the ability to trace ancestry as they do in Confucian cultures. Thai custom does not demand a male heir to perpetuate the family name and inherit family property. This cultural trait can be accounted for by the fact that
traditional people did not have family names – individuals were known only by their given names. The long term practice of bilateral inheritance is another cultural trait that reflects Thailand’s traditional trend to gender equity. Normally, each child, regardless of sex received an equal share of parental land or property on the death of the parents.

Regarding the issues on marriage, the cultures and rituals shows the importance of females in the Thai society. Unlike Confucian societies, Thais do not rely predominantly on male heirs for old-age security. In Thai society, a woman have complete freedom to choose her own spouse but it is generally done through the agreement of the parents as the boy is capable for their daughters in terms of social and financial status in the society. There is no question that Thai women are devoted themselves fully to their husband after marriage though they hold freedom in many aspects.

Regarding culture and tradition of Thailand, Saranya and Sirikanang Chaiyasuta (2002) pointed out that, it is the culture and tradition that hinder the development of Thai women. This fact is both true and false. They implanted the belief that women should respect men, and women are secondary to men. From that belief, women leave all the decision-making to men. And it was the men who took the role of deciding everything, not in terms of having power but in shouldering responsibility. Men are satisfied with the role of supporting and securing women for their living. This culture does not obstruct the way men and women live together, but in some ways, it kept women away from the liberty to live their lives. This may be the ground why the structure of laws is criticized to be unfair to women. Nevertheless, the rights by laws or Thai culture, which Thai women had in the past, cannot be implied that women have no power.

Many scholars have criticized the culture and tradition of Thailand from different perspectives. Juree Vichit-Vadakan (1993) criticizes Thai traditional and cultural ideas in terms of creating a paradox within the social setting. While men were imbued with formal authority, power, and leadership, women were active in economic exchange and trade. Being in charge of the inner domain also meant being in control of the family purse.
By touching on all the aspects with which the status of the women has been measured, we can draw out the conclusion that the status of Thai women has improved since 1970 (1970 is considered to be an important year because Thailand shifted from subsistence economy to market economy since early Bangkok period, but impact on women had become quite visible in early 1970s as women issues became visible in the National Development Plans and also because Thailand was discovered in the year 1970s for its cheap and available pool of young women) and that the roles played by women in Thailand’s national development have broadened considerably. However, some of the incidents, cultures, rituals show that women in Thailand especially from underprivileged or disadvantaged groups still face considerable difficulties. Despite their sincere contribution in the national GDP, societal works, and also the household chores, they still face discrimination and oppression which place them in an inferior position relative to men in the society.

It has been a long journey in Thai history before Thai women’s status came to the present condition. Prior to 1932, Thailand’s political history can be summarized into three chronological kingdoms: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin.

**Sukhothai Period (1238-1378 AD)**

King Sri Inthrathit was the founder of Sukhothai kingdom. Justice system was very minimal during the Sukhothai period. The king was able to exercise direct justice system attending to the needs of the people. The role of the king has been both political and Buddhist-centric. In some periods the king was so awe-inspiring, that it was forbidden for the commons to look upon his face or touch his royal person (Ray 1972:177).

During Sukhothai period, the positions of women were largely confined to a predominant role as housewives and in domestic activities. Their roles in important activities like decision making were very insignificant and they kept away from these to a great extent. However, recent studies on Thai women indicate that men and women are treated equally in the social sphere. Most studies on Thai women reveal that they were of equal status to their husbands in the Sukhothai time of the ancient period in the history of Thailand (Rabihadana1977:25).
The influence of Brahmanic and Buddhist teachings which viewed status of men and women as equal were not evident since the Sukhothai period. According to Bunyong (1989), documents of Sukhothai, both men and women of the period had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Chamthewi was the first female ruler of Lampun (Haripunchai Empire). And, in Mangrai Dynasty there were two female rulers who governed the kingdom during weak periods, Phranang Chirapraphathewi and Pranang Wisutthithewi. Except for the three female rulers of Lanna, the role of women in the sphere of politics and governance was that of supporting the men by agreeing to be a commodity in marriage alliance arrangement (Pongsapich 1997:6-7).

During this period, among the upper class, the concept of patriarchy evident in the demonstration of power and authority was gradually adopted. Available documents indicate that polygamy was practiced during the time. The Sukhothai laws did not treat men and women equally. Women were classified into classes depending on their marital status. While men may have more than one wife, women who had more than one husband were not allowed. Categorizing wives and women into different classes resulted in their off-springs being treated differently as well. Categorization of wives became very clearly defined during Ayutthaya period during the reign of King Baromatrailokanat when class system was much more developed. The inequality of men and women evident since the Sukhothai period has been reproduced and strengthened in the laws of subsequent reigns all through Ayutthaya period up to Bangkok period as is evident in Kotnai Tra Sam Duang (Ibid:7-8). It is however said that the status of women in Sukhothai period is not as high as they are not allowed to participate in many of the activities especially in decision making and they were categorized in various classes and not equally treated with men.

Ayudhya Period (1350-1767) - 417 years

The first ruler of Ayutthaya was King Ramadhipati. Thai society during the Ayutthaya period became strictly hierarchical. There were, broadly three classes of people, with king at the very apex of the structure. At the bottom of the social scale, and the most numerous, were the commoners (freemen or phrai) and the slaves. Above the commoners
were the officials or "nobles" (khunnang) while at the top of the scale were the princes (choa). Only classless sector of Thai society was the Buddhist monkhood, or Sangha into which all classes of Thai men could be ordained. The monkhood was the institution. The Buddhist monasteries being the center of all Thai communities both urban and agricultural could weld together all the different social classes (Manickavasagom 1986:19).

With the rise of the Ayudhya era some six centuries ago, there seemed to be a decline in the status of women. There also appeared more class stratification between the women themselves (National Council of Women of Thailand 1974:18). A law entitled “The Law on Husbands and Wives” enacted in 1931 allowed men to practice polygamy and divided wives into different categories. It also empowered husbands to inflict corporal punishment on their wives.

The available literature and most studies show that, there is no evidence of woman’s active participation in decision making and recognition of their contribution in various fields in Ayutthaya period. They were generally a medium of exchange used to foster political alliance or offering them to the male leaders in power. In that sense women’s position in the Ayutthaya period was worse as compared to Sukhothai period. During the Ayutthaya period women are merely used for political alliances, which are highly male centric (Tantiwiramanond 1997:167-79).

Rattanakosin Period (1782-1809)

The Rattanakosin era replaced the Ayudhya era. According to Thai History, King Rama I (1782-1809) moved to the capital from Thonburee to Bangkok and fought a war with the Burmese who were again trying to wrest control of Thailand. By this time Chan, the Governor’s widow and her sister Mook and women were disguising as men, fought with the enemy. In recognition of their honour and bravery, King Rama I conferred royal titles on the two sisters for bravery namely: Tao Thep Satri and Tao Sri Sunthorn (Chan and Mook). Today, the Heroines’ Monument is located at the south of the airport in the traffic circle on the main highway that honors their memory (Chakri Dynasty 2008: 4/10).
Another example is of Ya Mo, wife of the governor of Korach. Ya Mo and her people protected City of Korach. At present, her statue is located in the city of Korach where she is regarded as a symbol of courage, especially by the Northeastern Thais (Quoted in Phuket History 2008: 4/10).

During this period, according to the available sources, it shows that the position of women and their contribution is recognized to some extent. However, regarding the ordinary women there is no sign of existence in the history.

**Status of Women: In the Current Royal Dynasty**

The position of women in the Thai society has gone through several phases - having several ups and downs. They have achieved several victories in terms of legal changes such as stringent laws against rape and prostitution, but the impact on the respect for women still remains limited. Those limits need to be understood in terms of history, politics and cultural forces playing up certain issues and have contributed to achieving limited success for women, because women were not being allowed their own privileges and also they acted according to the laws of the country, which were backward in the ancient time (Suchart 1989:64-65).

It is true that in the Thai society, men and women were considered equal before the law. However, culturally women are hindered and practically this restrained them from receiving benefits from it. In other words, women are not equally treated in the society viz, politically, socially, economically and culturally. Practice of monarchy, which exercised monopoly in decision making to a great extent, hampered the rights of the women in various grounds. King Rama II was not interested in the welfare and upliftment of women in the society. In 1851, Rama IV who became the King of Rattanakosin attempted to uplift Thai women. The study on women for this research will commence at this point of history.

In the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) (Traditional Thai Women 2009: 5/7) who was the first to attempt to modernize his country, women were gradually encouraged to take
part in social activities. This started in high society first. Educational opportunities were offered to women of high ranks. In the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), Queen Saovabaphongsi was the first woman in Thai history who was designated as regent and was assigned full authority to administrate public affairs during the king’s visit to Europe in 1896.

King Rama VI (1910-1925), (Ibid.,) who got his education from abroad, launched campaign to win rights for Thai women, though it was limited to high society circles. King strongly expressed his views through several articles to correct some old beliefs, values, and traditions that made women inferior to men. The King once wrote: “Women are still much oppressed. For example, they are prohibited from having long hair (after marriage) for reasons of not looking neat.... Some men consider wearing short hair and keeping teeth black suggest the politeness of women. Women are also deprived of the right to associate with men... for the reason that if women obtain too much freedom, they will be spoilt.” Beside this, King did several works for the improvement of women’s position, which includes:

1) Promoting education without sexual discrimination by issuing the Primary Education Decree 1921 requiring all children from 7-14 years old to study in the schooling system without paying any fee.

2) Setting up Benjama Raja Lai School in 1913 for training women teachers.

3) Improving women’s looks and attire by having a campaign for women to wear long hair and phasing instead of chongkraben and stop chewing areca nuts so that their teeth would not be black.

Tamara Loos (2004:173), a political historian of women in Thailand, began her treatise with the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV) in 1851. Women’s history prior to King Mongkut’s reign, with a few exceptions, belonged to a kind of historical dark age. This could be substantiated with reference to the Three Seals Laws (David K. 1999:83-84) which served as the legal foundation for polygamy, granting the right to alienate women from their parents or husbands and these are treated as patriarchal laws under the modern perspective. However, change began during the reign of Rama IV who signed the
Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855. Bowring Treaty with Britain by King Rama IV in 1855 opened Thailand’s economy to international trade and granted treaty partners extraterritoriality and residence rights in Siam and brought changes that affected gender relations and women’s economic position in rural areas. During the reign of King Rama IV, the practice of husbands selling their wives against their will was abolished. Rama V abolished slavery while Rama VI introduced in 1921 compulsory primary education for all, regardless of gender (Ghosh 1990:11).

On this account, scholar like Siriphon Skrobanek argues that it lowered the status of rural women because their economic power decreased, and it created new feminine standards for urban women that were nonetheless patriarchal. As she said, it was meaningless to criticize the Bowring Treaty and King Mongkut (Loos 2004:72). Tamara Loos further suggests two case studies as a methodology for writing women’s history in Thailand. First case is Amdaeng Muan, who has been eulogized as such in history, literature, and film. As a female first, women historians have upgraded her as the first link in a chain of events that led to women’s suffrage and constitutionally protected gender equality. In the second case (Amdeang Can) a similar kind of class-based bias occurs. She was also a female commoner from the nineteenth century, similarly gained fame as one of Thailand’s first women’s rights advocates. Her husband without her knowledge or consent sold her into slavery. The King used Amdeang Can’s case to preface a law in 1868 prohibiting commoner, husbands and parents from selling wives and children without first receiving the permission of them. Some scholars have cited this law as additional proof of King Mongkut’s concern for women and individual rights (Loos 2004:173). She further explains that, King Mongkut’s laws on lakpha were motivated by a concern to maintain a social hierarchy in the face of a changing political and economic environment (Ibid:188).

Tamara Loos argues that, King Mongkut did not promote the welfare of women as a whole. He had passed the laws that produced the woman firsts’ which were directed against commoner men and favoured elite groups upon whom his power depended (Hong Lysa 1999:310-324).
Women under Constitutional Government

1932 revolution has brought some change in the political system from an absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. The event had much impact on the social role of Thai women. Women were able to enjoy the political right equal to men under the new constitution and the government corrected the civil law allowing a man to have only one lawful wife.

P. Pibunsonggram (1938-1944), who was the third Prime Minister in Thai constitutional monarchy and a field marshal, showed his determination to raise women’s status. It was stipulated in his policy to lift Thai women’s status to be equal to that in the developed countries. He viewed that women had the capability to be quality citizens, they played an important role in the family and society, and they could help the country in wartime (Traditional Thai Women 2009: 5/7).

In Phibun’s policy of nation building, women were urged to view themselves as important partners of men in building the nation. It was clearly announced in Phibun’s speech that, “Women are part of the nation; they should set up themselves and meanwhile help the nation. Generally, during a short visit, in order to see how much developed the nation is, it can be judged by looking at the women’s development” (Niyata Onozawa, 2001:82-83). The role of the women was divided into two main categories; according to Phibun the first is occupation and education and secondly is family life and social roles. So women always have to take all responsibilities of housekeeping, bear and care children’s education and look after husband’s interests, and also to take care of her beauty in keeping with western culture (Mahajani 1978:65).

Women’s occupations and education were undivided words under Phibun’s period. Considering the socio-political and situations, women were to be accommodated in the government’s main policies like westernization, economic nationalism and the preparation of war (Kanai Lal Hazra 2000:88). After the World War I, there was a shortage of nurses, when he emphasized women polices under training for medical care, nursing, Red Cross, Girl-guide activities, and woman military training. By this process,
women status in these fields was improved. During the course of preparation for war, it was realized that the country was very underdeveloped. As intellectuals and professionals in many fields were inadequate in number, the shortage of manpower in higher level had brought opportunities for women. Women graduates from abroad with negligible number were appointed to significant positions in education, medical science, and public health. Graduate domestic women were also needed in various areas of governmental work (Luke 1997:98-130). In order to encourage women to work with the government, the Civilian Official Act was amended in 1939 to hire capable persons without consideration of gender. The Day of Women Government Officers was founded on February 1 in 1943. However, limitations for female officers were specified. Works of the following nature were not assigned to women officers: Work outside governmental offices, Work during night time, Dangerous and tough work and Work in foreign countries. It clearly shows that women were allowed to work only in the office. Women’s participation in all four kinds of jobs was limited in Thai’s government. By Thai law, as it exists today, no female member of the royal family can succeed the throne. The Law of Primogeniture holds good only for the male members, they only may become kings (Ghosh 1990:12). Then another important matter was that in Thai culture, women have to be ladies i.e. always obey to what their husband want and behave well and being good mother, wife, daughter, sister etc. (Cultural Imperialism and Thailand Women’s Portrayals on Mass Media 2009: 3/18).

Above all even the government and policy makers were not seriously considered the issues of women. Of Thailand’s past 15 constitutions, (Asian Development Bank 2002:40) the 1974 constitution was the first to specify equality between men and women i.e. Constitutional monarchy of Thailand since 1932, Section 30 states: “All persons shall enjoy rights and liberties subject to the provisions of the Constitution. Men and women shall enjoy equal rights.” This provision was deleted in 1976. It was then reinstated in 1994, after a vigorous campaign by the WCWA and non-government organizations (NGOs).
Women Leaders and Their Role in the Society

When we go back to the history of Thailand, we have discovered the active role of some women and their significant and courageous contribution in various streams especially in administration of the country. Regarding women rulers, we can mention about famous three rulers of Sukhothai period i.e. Chamthewi of Haripunchai (Lampun), Chirapraphathewi, and Wisuttithewi of Mangrai Dynasty. Besides this, we can mention about the records of Phra Maha Thewi, the first women commander in chief of Chiangmai who invaded Phrae, the ruler of Phrae, Thao Mae Khun. However, the contribution of the women has always been neglected and recognized after a long period. Here we can remember about Thao Thepsatri and Thao Srisunthon the two sisters who helped wage war with Burma and kept them away from Muang Thalang in Phuket Island during the reign of King Rama I (1782-1809) which was not recorded until approximately thirty-forty years later.

Women have played an active role in restoring independence for Thailand. They had equal opportunity as men to contribute to their country. Women were not the hind legs of an elephant as the saying goes; they were the fore-legs when the country called for them. Many traditionalists view these women leaders as an indication that Thai women have been treated equally by the men (Pongsapich 1997:19).

Women’s Movement

According to Juree (1993:182), women’s movement in Thai society in general is not highly organizational. In other words, social groups and social affiliations, particularly in the formal sense, are not numerous.

From the Sukhothai period till the early Bangkok period, men dominated over women. Under the marriage law, polygamy was allowed but not polyandry, adultery was allowed for men but not for women and men could punish women physically, but not vice versa. A protest by a woman against forced marriage during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-
1868) is well known among feminist writers. Here we can emphasize that women always need to fight for their rights which they deserve as a human same as man.

During 1920s, women were encouraged to organize themselves and establish associations. As a result of this, during this time, many formal organizations of women have been recognized. First recognized women’s organization was Sapha U-nalome Daeng which was established in 1890 and later became the Red Cross.

After World War II, many women’s non-profit organizations came into being. Some played a pivotal role in the legislation of family law and one woman was elected in national election of 1950. Since then there were women representatives, although their number could never reach twenty at a time. The organizations working on issues of women in the developmental process which deserve mention include the Thai Girl Guides Association, the Association for the Promotion for the Status of Women, the Women Lawyers’ Association of Thailand, the Gender and Development Research Institute, the Friend’s of Women Group, the Foundation for Women, the Association for Civil Liberty, and the Christian Women’s Association (Pongsapich 1997: 23-24).

Number of women participated in the field of media and support for the women’s issues also increased. Bhikkhuni movement of 1928 of the two sisters, Sara and Chongdi Bhasit in which they received the samaneri or female novice ordination, is considered as one of the well known movement led by the women (Ibid:22).

Thai women have been involved with Non-governmental organizations for a long time. They have been active even before World War II. Some of the well known women’s organizations are National Council of Women of Thailand (NCWT), Girl Guides Association of Thailand (GGAT), Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW) etc. Most of these groups, both welfare and action-oriented, are run by urban middle-class women. These organizations are important as they act as a bridge between government and the people, as a watchdog of government’s plans and programmes, and as a mechanism to activate civil society. They have made women’s issues an acceptable
public agenda and served as new role model for grassroots women (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1997:114-115).

Suteera and Maytinee (1995) argue that the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) was crucial in making women more visible in Thai society. Members of NGOs, many women's groups, and even the government participated in various events promoting the status of women. The 1980's and 90's have seen an explosion of NGOs, with three hundred and seventy-five NGOs formally registered in 1990. The enthusiasm among women's groups was most recently bolstered by the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women and the preceding NGO forum in Beijing, China. A number of Thai NGOs and smaller grass-roots organizations attended, along with several Thai academics (Costa 1997). Some of the larger and more visible Thai women's NGOs include the Foundation for Women, Friends of Women, Gender Watch, EMPOWER, and the Gender Development and Research Institute. These groups are progressive and emancipatory in that they are working towards structural change. Their activities include, but are not limited to, the following: developing media and educational resources for women's consciousness raising, monitoring images of women in all forms of public media, offering health services to prostitutes and the poor, teaching women new and practical skills, providing shelters for battered women, incorporating women's rights into the constitution, and providing conferences and programs for leadership training. Other women's organizations which are more conservative in approach include the National Council of Women in Thailand, the Girl Guides Association of Thailand, and the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. Additionally, smaller women's organizations and grass-roots groups, whose memberships range in size from one to thousands, exist throughout the country.

Besides these, the West (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1997:115) has influenced Thai women's organizations through western fundings and implementation strategies, and sometimes by following "fashionable" international concerns) and have been mostly elite initiatives. There are a large number of marginalized women who have resisted impoverishment and have created various coping mechanisms for themselves, more so in
rural Thailand. They do not sit idly watching their resources disappear and life chances diminish. For their own survival and for their families, they defy traditions such as migration. In order to support their family young women who are in high demand by the MNCs were moved and migrated to urban areas and support their family.

**Contemporary Thai Social System under Modernization Era**

In the context of early Rattanakosin period (Pongsapich 1997:13-14) the country was shifting from subsistence economy to market economy with drastic socio-economic change. Unmarried women were encouraged to be independent and play equal part in economic and social spheres. At the same time, they were also given guidelines on how to behave to survive the changing environment where women had to take care of themselves. They were taught to protect their virginity, avoid elopement and unwanted pregnancy. The content was indeed “modern” responding to the early “modernization” development strategy of the time. However, despite the more liberal perception on the status and role of women, patriarchy was still evident.

Reorganization of the traditional civil service and a sudden increase in the number of government employees of the 1880s signifies the beginning of the process of Modernization in Thailand. Western influences were the most important factor that brought about changes in the role and status of Thai women. West has influenced Asian societies with concepts like nuclear families and monogamy which are well accepted. The influence of the West in Asian legal systems also lead to the adoption of western practices such as legalizing marriage certificates and adoption of the use of family names through the male lines. Impact of the west and modern bureaucracy is also seen in Thailand when the government realized the need to have a legal household heads and identified men as household head even in a bilateral society. The concept of power and authority also came with western patriarchy. Two outstanding outcomes of the westernization on Thai society is the equal opportunity of education for both men and women and monogamy (Ibid:11-12).
According to Ghosh (1990:24) the story of Thailand's development in the past two decades is a mind-numbing parade of statistics. A new middle class has emerged in the cities where professionals predominate. The women of Thailand have become conscious of their distinctive identity and interests. They are also striving to create a social and economic position for themselves and are trying to find their identity.

Along with this, Thailand has rapidly adopted the values and characteristics of Western consumer culture as a result of which there is a decline of extended family and rich in nuclear family trend. "Housewivization" as Mies (1986) calls it, reflects the image of the good housewife with spotless dishes and clean laundry. This process strengthens sexual stereotypes and provides the necessary market for the rapidly expanding consumer goods industries such as household appliances, cosmetics, and clothing. Westernized notions of beauty and Madison Avenue images of ideal body type's lead to concern for exercise and dieting. With the growth of education and increasing female participation in the labour force the pressures of maintaining two jobs increase. There has been an increase in domestic violence cases which could be due to the presence of urban living, to the growing objectification of women on more frequent disclosure.

Comparatively speaking, Thai women are far better than many of their counterparts in other developing countries in terms of their role, right and recognition. With formal education and university degree, they serve their country in civil service and a variety of occupations and professions. In the agricultural sector also, women work side by side with their men in the fields and take care of household duties as well. The Thai women are conscious of their distinctive identity and interests. They are striving to create social and economic positions for themselves.

Niyata Onozawa's study (2001:93) "Thai women Changing Status and Roles during the Course of Thai Modernization, 2000" found out that Thai women's position has changed in status and roles during the process of modernization. Women in the upper socioeconomic class were engaged in the job market and were active in economic roles before industrialization. When industrialization occurred, women had already been in
high positions in various field and occupations. Continually, women in the middle and low levels aspired to receive education and enter the expanded job market in both traditional and modern sectors. Thus, women from different social classes had access to and control of household spending money. Moreover, petty trade in the form of buying and selling in the market place were carried out by women. This poses the paradox that male leadership could not have been absolute because women were in-charge of economic resources and activities.

Nevertheless, economic development and industrialization in Thailand has had mixed effects in the work and living conditions of women. Women apart from being “unpaid family workers” have entered the working class much to the detriment of the Thai social structure.

**Prostitution: The Flesh Business**

Prostitution is certainly not a new phenomenon, but global neoliberalism has encouraged it in several ways. Neoliberal globalization (Jaggar 2001:306) has increased the sexualization of all women, partly via a multibillion dollar pornography industry, and many women have been drawn into some aspect of sex work. Most obviously, it has disrupted traditional communities and displaced and impoverished many women, who see few other options for a livelihood. In addition, nineteenth-century colonialism created images of the "exotic" "native" women, whose sexuality was defined as highly attractive and fascinating. Today, media is also supporting the rhythms of prostitution in the country like Thailand as the government itself is willing to support it in order to attract foreign tourists. Therefore, market economy, commoditization, and consumerism are identified as important factor leading to large increase in number of prostitutes. Women have been used as commodities as exchange in marriage alliance during the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods (Pongsapich 1997:36).

Poverty and inequalities in development and income are underlying factors that cause, aid and abet trafficking all over the world. Concurrently, there is a history of sexual exploitation of women through prostitution, which has been preserved by patriarchal
cultures and communities over a very long time. Prostitution is not directly proportional to poverty; there are other factors too that encourage prostitution. In many poverty-stricken communities where women are more empowered, domestic violence, prostitution and other forms of sexual violence against women are also reduced. However, there can be no doubt that in a liberalized economy, the enlarged substratum of poverty does encourage trafficking. Along with this, forced migration, induced by globalization policies, makes women vulnerable to exploitation since they are not equipped with education or skilled labour. Without putting those checks in place, the women have become vulnerable to trafficking for commercial exploitation, which is a huge and thriving market in all parts of the country. This is a socialized relegation of women to a sexualized and commodified role, with no other options. Trafficking in women for commercial sexual exploitation is therefore one of the biggest manifestations of women being marginalized and victimized systematically, and then the formalized relegation of women to sexual exploitation, linking it to economic survival, to perpetuate this system (Sinha 2004:97-98).

Tourism also encouraged diverse forms of prostitution in Thailand. The private sector and tourism industry has been promoting this reputation for decades. The authorities did not try to cope with the problem, viewing prostitution as a part of Thai society. Messages in Internet which come out continuously since early 1996 describing notorious reputation of Thai prostitution service again helped create awareness and forced government agencies to do more work to change the image of Thai women (Pongsapich 1997:29-30). However, the government of Thailand is not looking at the increasing number of prostitution as a threat to the health of the people as it has been contributing to the national income to a large extent. The higher level of spreading of AIDS due to extramarital sex among Thai males, the use of drugs among the poor is a very serious problem too. Looking at the situation of Thailand, it is clear that HIV/AIDS is an issue of poverty and of gender inequality, but we must additionally be aware that it is also profoundly connected to processes of globalization which makes poor households poorer and added more problem on people especially poor people.
Asian Financial Crisis and Thai Women

Besides the flesh business, Asian financial crisis of 1997 severely affected the women of Thailand. Before the Asian Economic Crisis (Hewison 2001:1), Thailand was one of the world’s most successful economies. A number of international agencies lauded the Thai economy as a ‘model’ for other developing countries. Oddly, though, Thailand was neither a model of a market-driven economy favoured by neo-liberal economists nor of the developmentalism associated with the statist perceptions of ‘Asian Capitalism’5.

Due to this economic crisis, employment in construction in rural areas fell from 0.6 million persons in 1997 to 0.44 million persons in 1998 and 0.37 million in 1999. Besides this, women comprise 80 percent of unskilled labour laid off in the Manufacturing Sector in Thailand. (Bangkok Post: 22: February 1998)

Table 10: Number of Lay-offs by Sector and Sex in Thailand
(January 1997-February 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Garments</th>
<th>Textiles</th>
<th>Shoe, Leather Products</th>
<th>Food Processing</th>
<th>Finance</th>
<th>Electrical, Electronics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2120</td>
<td>3032</td>
<td>1533</td>
<td>1803</td>
<td>3337</td>
<td>3025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>1025</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>2622</td>
<td>1854</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There is also the unemployment of the new entrants of labour force in the labour market but enable to find employment as investment slows down. In the earlier period of the crisis, reduction in wage and working hours was implemented in the manufacturing sector as an option to the layoffs. This shows that the factories began to layoff and hire more workers on a temporary or short-term contract work, paying lower wages than existing permanent workers. The sector which produced the highest number of the layoffs

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5 Essentially, there had emerged a view that the state had played a significant role for late industrialisers in Asia, and this suggested that the neo-liberal market orthodoxy needed to be rethought. It was erroneously assumed that this approach to development represented a generically Asian Model.
as reported were textile and garment and electronic which employed the majority of women (Charoenloet 2005:133-134).

Thus, the economic crisis of the early 1970s (Soonthorndhada and Charoenloet 1988: 213) resulted in the diversification of industrial capital of the ‘core’ countries and the relocation of areas where labour is abundant, highly productive and cheap, and the labour movement is weak or absent. This internationalization coincided with the desire of some governments like Thailand to modernize their production processes and state apparatus through integration into the world economy. Their aim in doing so was to create the conditions for capital accumulation in the country. Thus, in recent years, we have witnessed the establishment of export processing zones (Free Trade Zones) in various developing countries. There has also been an increasing tendency for firms in developed countries to sub-contract (to producers, or subsidiaries of the MNC in the developing countries) the manufacture of certain products (or components) and the performance of certain products (or components) and the performance of certain processes. Final sale or assembly of the components however would take place in the ‘developed’ countries. The electronics industry is a good example of these two processes. Thus, developed countries are earning profits and getting benefits by using the cheap women labours of Thailand in the name of globalization which was once talked about bringing development, equality and justice in the entire universe.

With the impact of financial crisis many unwanted situations occurred in the Thai society as it led to an increasing trend towards family violence, lost of jobs for women etc. This hindered the fulfillment of their expected roles. Due to this, many husbands often left their wives. Along with this, migration of the male members in hunt of jobs put more burdens on rural women.

**General Views on Women in Thailand**

Stemming from Hindu or Buddhist teachings (Pongsapich 1997:14-15), present day local practices and rituals in Thai society still show a certain degree of male dominance or superiority. The impact of traditional religious beliefs on the local beliefs and practices of
rural people is also still very prominent such as belief on bad karma like adultery. For example, if a man commits adultery he would be reborn as women. Or, if a monk committed adultery, he would have to relive 500 lives as women. Consequently many men have an exploitative attitude towards women because of women’s lower status. Women born into such a gender-based stereotyped society will tend to internalize these beliefs and accept them as given. Commonly held prejudices of women’s mental and physical inferiority, handed down through cultural tradition and sanctioned by religion have profoundly affected on Thai women’s self-image and expressions of self-worth.

However, if we are looking deeply, the issue tells us that the origin of Thai women’s role in the local economy was due largely to the social structural requirements of the Sakdi Na system (Elliott, David 1978:47). As commoners were required to perform corvee labour for the king and the state, able men were drafted into services, which took them away from their homes for long periods. It was not uncommon for men in corvee service to leave home for a total of six months in a year. The responsibility of tending to household activities was left to the women (Paranakian 1984:255). Since they worked in the fields, looked after children and disposed of agricultural and other surplus in exchange for items they needed and which they could not produce, Thai women groomed and toughened themselves for a variety of activities including economic exchanges in the market. Historical conditions have propelled Thai women to assume the double burden of domestic and childcare functions on the one hand and the management of household economy on the other. Juree Vichit (1993:179-180) raises the questions like if women had a central position in economic production, why were they content to play a subservient role to men? Why did able women allow men to subjugate them and treat them like material items, subject to being brought or sold according to the whims of the owner? Why did they allow men to make the major decisions in the family? Here, if we were to examine traditional Thai society, we would see clearly that male supremacy,

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6 The ruling or sakdina class consisted of royalty, local chieftains, and others who held large grants of land at the pleasure of the king who headed the sakdina society

7 Corvée is labour, often but not always unpaid, that persons in power have authority to compel their subjects to perform, unless commuted in some way, such as by a cash payment; sometimes this was an option of the payer, sometimes of the payee, and sometimes not an option.
dominance and chauvinism were strongest among the social and political elite. At the apex of the society, corvee labour was not a requirement because anyone with noble ancestors was exempted. Money and wealth were made through political power and status; the nobility and loyalty were allowed to extract labour and resources from their clients. Hence, money and power were vested in men who were ennobled and who made their livelihood through their positions. As the social and political elite strengthened its hold on society, the value and norms that elite society saw as appropriate for it were disseminated to the rest of society.

Only after 1974-76 and with the UN Declaration of International Women's Year and the first international conference on women held in Mexico City, countries and international organizations have also expressed their collective commitments to improve the status of women through a number of declarations and program documents (ADB 2002:36). The growing changes in the international scenario on women’s role in the public domains, environmental and socio-economical issues had certainly influenced the position of the Thai women. In Thailand for instance the law was changed for the enlistment of women as a whole. When the country was set to move forward on the path of development, the people participated equally, with no bias for men and women (Mahajani 1978:65). Women were allowed public participation like entering into the local government bodies. On this account, we can mention about the tremendous changes on the status of women as compared to the earlier period. However, we should always see the impact of the changes which is brought by various forces especially globalization on women whether it is in a negative way or in a positive way.

Globalization and Thai Women

During the decade from 1968 to 1996, the policy of open economy which was the main driving force that facilitated the integration of the country into the world market, has encouraged rapid economic development in terms of industrialization and committed the Thai society to the globalization process. There has been major change in the trend of family and community settings with the emergence of industrialization. During the early phase of industrialization, migration rate was high among male members only as women
were left in the domestic domain to take care of the children and the home. As the income earned by the men were not sufficient, women take up payable work leaving their home aside. As factory work cannot accommodate married couples, only men and unmarried women join the formal economic sector as married couples are not accommodated in the factory. Due to migration for the reason of better job opportunities, families were separated from joint to nuclear and sometimes the head of the family move to other place resulting in temporary single-parent household. As a result, loosing of kinship ties and disappearance of residential extended families and mutual-aids units are being seen more and more.

According to Supachit Manopimoke (1997:226-227), earlier women were not able to solve domestic/family problems at home in their rural communities, but due to industrialization and establishment of manufacturing sector they tend to move forward and also become more active in demanding welfare and compensation for their personal loss at the work place. Not all of them are convinced that the employers are treating the workers fairly. Labour negotiations are being observed but the numbers of women involved in the negotiations are small. Nevertheless, they started participating in the labour movement, and began demanding occupational health support like child-care, social security, and old-aged pension.

There is a clear shift in the nature of women’s participation in the national economy since the 1970s. Women have joined the wage-labour force in greater numbers than ever before with the expansion in jobs outside of the dominant agricultural sector. Traditionally agriculture was the main focus of economic activity for Thais, and women were an integral part of the agricultural labour force. Today census data indicates the expansion in the female labour force. In 1980, 44.4 per cent of the economically active persons (age 11 and over) were women and in 1990 this had increased to about 68 per cent (age 13 and over). This high participation rate does not necessarily equate to high wages since many of the women identified as ‘engaged in employment’ are working on family farms and remain unpaid for their labour (Limanonda 2000:256).
Conceivably those women who took more active role in the process of socio-economic development were those in the professional and administrative groups. For one reason, they were more educated, better informed, and have better income than the average. Their status and role were thus more superior to the rest (Ghosh 1990:195). This situation does not apply to all the women in Thailand. The major concern is towards the women who are working in the fields and private firms who are not highly educated and are the victims of globalization. However, the work conditions of women migrants, slum-dwellers and sex workers are even more difficult to ascertain since their life-styles often preclude the government’s statistics collectors intervention. It is clear, nonetheless, that women workers in both the agricultural and industrial sectors face numerous health hazards as a direct consequence of their work environments. Many women are routinely exposed to toxic substances in the textile industry such as lead, aluminum, and trichloroethylene (Limanonda 2000:256-257).

With the rapid socio-economic developments and improved health care facilities/services, there has been a decline in fertility rates and the mortality rates which has been reduced to the lowest ever (5-6:1000 population). Life expectancy has risen accordingly and currently the rate stands at 74.9 years for women and 69.9 for men (NSO 1997a). A major social policy implication of the comparative longevity of women is that there will be an increasing need for appropriate programs to care for large numbers of elderly women who were economically dependent on decreased male partners. Despite the improved health conditions of the population in general, Thai women still face numerous gender specific health problems related to childbirth. Prime among these is maternal death caused by direct obstetric causes such as haemorrhage and anaemia. Maternal death resulting from malignant neoplasm is the second most frequent cause of death of women in Thailand. In 1997 it was estimated that approximately 15,000-20,000 pregnant women are found to be HIV positive each year and about 4000-6000 of their babies will be born infected with the virus (NSO 1997a. cited in Limanonda 2000:256-257).

In Thailand, women far outnumbered men in the manufacturing workforce by the 1990s. A dual market emerged in the female labour force: first, an impermanent, highly casual
and flexible workforce in garment and leather manufacturing industries supplied by cheap migrant labour, and second, a permanent, semi-skilled/skilled workforce as in electronics and plastics assembly (Falkus 2000: 175-94).

An important observation on Thai society is that, given the importance of cottage industries as well as labour-intensive farming practices where females play equal or greater roles than males, society has generally recognized a major economic role for women in the family and the local community. The forces of modernization in the 1960s and thereafter, including the shift from an agricultural to a more industrialized economy, deeply affected such traditions and contributed a new pattern of women’s participation. However, not much consideration was given to this emerging phenomenon by anybody (UNESCAP 1987: 20). Not only this, it is also widely believed that economic freedom has reinforced the already relatively equal status of women and men in Thailand by providing young women with independent sources of income. However, women working in the informal sector are hardly recognized, as a result accurate figure of working women are difficult to obtain and generally not available. Therefore, contribution of women in the national economic growth and development has always been neglected and women workers are suffering especially in the private sectors where they have not been treated equally with their male counterparts. The position is that though globalization brought independent place and position of women but not in equal pace as that of men. Therefore, it is will not be wrong to say that globalization makes deeper the degree of discrimination against women in the Thai society, and women are suffering under the umbrella of globalization with multiple burden both at rural and urban areas.

From the available resources and problems, an obvious question arises, which is, what is the role of the Thai government on the matters of development? What are the issues on which government is focusing on in order to maintain the equality in the society especially on gender and welfare of the women?
Government Response on Issues of Women

The latest Thai constitution (1997) stated that, “men and women are equal under the law (section 30) and that “family violence is prohibited by state (section 53).” The government declared its national policy to eliminate violence against women and children in June 1999. Also, Section 30 says that all persons are equal before the law and shall enjoy equal protection under the law. Men and women shall enjoy equal rights. Unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of origin, race, language, sex, age, physical or health condition, personal status, economic or social standing, religious belief, education or constitutionally political view, shall not be permitted.

During 1940s, the government began to address the problem of improving the status of Thai women. Many laws were revised to eradicate institutionalized discrimination against women. Women were guaranteed equal opportunities to enter the public service, after the Alimony provisions which aimed to protect women’s livelihood after divorce. Women’s Lawyers Association of Thailand (WLAT) lobbied the government to include specific provisions guaranteeing gender equality in the National Constitution - “All persons shall enjoy rights and liberties under the Constitution. Men and women have equal rights. Violence of the rights and liberties guaranteed in the Constitution shall not be permitted” (Limanonda 2000:251-252). However, much effective steps regarding this have been taken up by the government. Since 1961 there have been seven national economic development plans in Thailand, but they have not given adequate attention to women. The UN Action Plan (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1997:110-111) for the decade of women (1975-85) partially influenced this plan. During this UN decade of women, several committees and national commissions were created and subsequently dissolved. But the government’s attention remained minimal and confined to the planning level. Recognition of government for women as a specific target group in development did not occur until the Fourth Development Plan, covering the years 1977 to 1981. The Plan indicated women’s importance and what shall be done to encourage their participation in the development process, in terms of creating educational opportunities, generating equality through legal reform, expanding occupational opportunities for generating income and providing special short-term measures and preparing for long-term change.
UNESCAP 1987:20. The Fifth plan included women as a target group and discussed improvement in female labour, education, health, training and political participation. Unfortunately, the trend of identifying women as an autonomous heading and target was abandoned in the Sixth (1987-91) and the Seventh (1992-96) Plans. It was subsumed under the heading of health or the development of the “people”.

In support of the above statements, Thailand National Commission on Women’s Affairs stated that:

“The First Plan (1961-1966) aimed at 7.2% per annum growth rate and was oriented towards infrastructural development with no specific mention of women’s development... The Second Plan (1967-1971) was very much the continuation of the First Plan but provided more Leeway for region specific development. It aimed at 8.5% per annum growth rate as its target. Subsequently, the Third Plan emphasized a 7% growth rate...The Third Plan mentioned to help women and children especially in relation to health and labor protection. It is with the Fourth Plan (1977-1981) that women’s development started to appear as an important concern for national planning”.


Thai Family Law within the Civil Code contains many outright discriminatory items. For example, if a woman engaged to be married has sexual relations with a man other than her fiancé, her fiancé is entitled to terminate the engagement and seek compensation from the third party (Limanonda 2000:259). Besides this, one of the major family problems in Thai society is domestic violence especially battering i.e. wife beating which remains underreported because of the social stigma attached to the victims and the perpetrators. Despite social stigma, fear from being left alone, homeless, insecurity, lack of economic independence may be sited as some of the reasons. Bangkok, the capital of the country has the highest concentration of women who had experienced domestic violence. There is no strict functioning of any laws to protect women from domestic violence.

Increasing involvement of Thailand (Ibid: 252) in global and regional bodies has also been a considerable influence on the improving status of women since 1970s. The role of women in development received its most intense attention to date in the Fourth Five-Year

*Women in the Non-Governmental Sector*

Non-governmental involvement of Thai women is not new, but its character has changed over the years. Thai women were involved in voluntary agencies even before World War II. Some of the important women organizations are National Council of Women of Thailand (NCWT), Girls Guides Association of Thailand (GGAT), Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW) etc. Most of these groups, both welfare and action-oriented, are run by urban middle-class women. The work of women NGOs is important as a bridge between government and the people, as a watchdog of government’s plans and programmes, and as a mechanism to activate civil society. They have made women’s issues an acceptable public agenda and served as new role model for grassroots women (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1997:113-115). Numerous non-governmental organizations, mostly located at Bangkok, are active in providing women’s development programmes. It has been observed that the government tries to emphasize integrated activities while non-governmental organizations focus on specific activities. The result may be conflicts between organizations, duplication of efforts, lack of coordination, incorrect identification of target groups’ needs, and ultimately, less effective programmes. The government has recognized these problems but seems uncertain whether centralization could provide the direction, priorities or procedures to satisfy all interest groups and organizations (UNESCAP 1987:21-22).

It is noted that the combined efforts of the various NGOs working on the women development issues comprise the active body of the Thai women’s movement. The Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) targets policy makers and development planners as well as grass-roots women in the attempt to ensure that development initiatives are gender sensitive and to enhance the dialogue between women
and development planners on the issues that affect the livelihood and welfare of Thai women.

Besides the efforts of the NGOs, the government also has taken steps on and off to improve the legal status of women e.g. a 1982 law allowed women to be village heads or sub-district chiefs. Similarly, a 1975 law made it possible for women to become judges and public prosecutors. However, in both family and political rights, there are still numerous practical legal hurdles against women that affect their social status. Women still cannot become district officers. Women are not accepted into the prestigious military academy. After marriage a women is required to change her last name to her husband’s (Name Act of 1982). In case of divorce, women have to provide more evidence than men (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1997:112-113). In several ways, it is noted that the attempt of the government to improve the situation of women is inadequate –

1) The government’s concerns or understanding of women’s issues have fluctuations.
2) The implementation of programmes has been geared more toward improving the traditional role of women as wife and mother.
3) The impact has been very little since women participate in training or courses which are women/ domestic-oriented, such as dress-making, cooking or income-generating, but they can hardly utilize their knowledge; they are either busy in agricultural work or do not have enough education, credit/ fund or management experience to continue their enterprises.

Due to high pressure from the NGOs on government regarding women welfare issues, some of the changes in the law have been made. For example, the 90-days maternity leave for industrial workers was approved in 1993 after a demand from the NGOs. And after much coaxing, the Thai government has signed the Covenant for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) with some reservations (Ibid: 113).

On the other hand, scholars like Alison M. Jaggar (2001:309) argued that NGOs are sometimes represented as a weapon use to discriminate in some way or the other - With
the advent of global neoliberalism, an increasing proportion of so-called development assistance from richer to poorer countries has become channeled through nongovernmental organizations rather than through the governments of the recipient countries. Whereas neoliberals justify this change as avoiding official bureaucracy and corruption and as empowering grassroots women, critics argue that addressing social problems through private rather than public channels undermines democracy by depoliticizing the poor. Involvement in "self-help" micro-projects encourages poor women to exhaust their scarce energies in developing ad hoc services or products for the informal economy, rather than mobilizing as citizens to demand that the state utilize their tax monies for the provision of public services. Some critics argue that foreign-funded NGOs are a new form of colonialism because they create dependence on nonelected overseas funders and their locally appointed officials, undermining the development of social programs administered by elected officials accountable to local people. Thus, even though NGOs create programs that involve and serve women, their mission of providing services privately tacitly acquiesces in the state's shedding of its public responsibilities. Even though they use the language of inclusion, empowerment and grass-roots democracy, NGOs often undermine the social citizenship entitlements of poor women.

Besides these efforts and role of NGOs (both negative and positive), authorities of the Thai Government had proclaimed a new phase of equal rights for women, Thai representatives told the CEDAW that Thai women preferred not to take risks, especially political ones; their traditional role was to look after the family and raise the children and, in that context, the introduction of affirmative action had not been well accepted (Jens Malmstrom 2002). However, the student revolution of 1973 and the blossoming of democratic ideals and practice in Thailand made it possible to initiate changes in the laws to grant equal rights in different areas for women (Prasith-Rathsint 1980:81).

Although Article 30 in the Constitution states that women and men shall enjoy equal rights, the realities of politics in Thailand make it far more daunting for women to enter politics (Thai’s Government Constitution 1997:13). Recent statistics indicate that female participation in national politics remains low. Thai Women in Politics: A study of the
Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) shows that only 15 females have held the office of a minister or a deputy minister (Women in Thailand’s Government Speak Out 2008: 4/10). Participation of women in politics especially in decision making is becoming very important as it has been one of the indicators to measure the status of the women of a country.

Transforming Status and Role of Thai Women

Gender relations in three Thai Kingdoms of Sukhothai, Ayudhaya, and Ratanakosin indeed provide a positive template for the inscribing of a better status of women in the twentieth century. The pace of improvement of women’s status in Thai society since 1970s is quite dramatic in nature. However, the question is that whether the transformation is leading them into positive direction or not? And how far women are benefited by this transformation?

In accordance with changes in the economic structure, the roles of Thai women have changed dramatically. Although Thai women were known to have played an active role in the economy (this is particularly true for female commoners), their economic role was largely limited to farming and small-scale commerce due to the fact that Thai society was a subsistence society. And when farmlands become scarce and insufficient for distribution among daughters (then parents start supporting education for their daughters for future security), coupled with the introduction of cash economy, the roles and status of both Thai men and women have changed in several ways. This change resulted in men having lost autonomous control over education to women, and women having lost autonomous control over land to men. Women also tend to lose their traditional area of power in the domestic domain, where their roles, duties and properties were acquired. In addition, in the case that their husbands’ other family members bring income from outside the family, the women no longer have the same degree of control over their household budget (Busakorn Suriyasarn: 1993).

This is undeniable that Thailand’s First Five-Year National Economic Development Plan of 1961-66 laid the groundwork for a remarkable transformation. Over three decades,
Thailand has achieved an exceptional economic growth rate with an average of 7.8 per cent per annum since 1970. The average per capita income reached 68000 Baht (US$1700) in 1995 compared with only 2100 baht (US$53) in 1961. Accompanying the industrialization of the economy has been the development of social services and public utilities – electricity, water and education and health services (NESDB 1997). These major structural changes have had a dramatic influence on the day-to-day lives of Thai women. Nonetheless, the need for gender specific policy initiatives remains crucial in ensuring women gain full benefit from these social and economic improvements (Limanonda 2000:248). Women have equal rights to manage the property and the family according to the Thai law. Of course, there were times when a woman has inferior rights in the family- the rights to manage the finance, the rights in the decision of family and even for her own self such as the place to live in or move to. However, access to higher education of women and their ability to finance the family has brought about an improvement (Zhiqin 2009: 410).

Regarding the service sector, it is observed that the proportion of women in the service range of work is very high - hotels, restaurants and massage parlours. Majority of the women workers in this sector are prostituted by profession which is a threat to public health and morality. Most of them are into these professions pushed by poor economic conditions of the family and majority of them are from the north-east part of Thailand which is the poorest part of the country. This gives a contradictory question that, whether the transformation which is brought by the process of globalization is benefitting women or not. Because, many problems and difficulties are being faced by Thai women in every sectors and they are being treated as cheap labour as compared to their male counterparts.

Along with this, with the growing internationalization of the booming Thai economy, inequalities remain prevalent in many areas, especially among rural communities suffering from the impact of marginalization. These communities are increasingly denied the right to control their resources—land, water or forest. While deeply subjected to commercialism and consumerism through economic participation and the global media in the same way as their urban counterparts, the rural villagers are more isolated from
political participation and the control of their own lives (Anan 2003:127). These bring the disparities between rural and urban, rich and poor, male and female in the Thai society.

Nevertheless, as compared to men, the role of women in the development process is still limited and their status is still under-privileged. Economic as well as social structures do not give rise to women to become equal. The most basic problem may be the deeply ingrained attitude of both men and women concerning the separate roles and functions of the sexes in the society. By and large, disparities in work opportunity, income, educational opportunities, political representation, health care, legal treatment, training opportunities and so on, exist (Ghosh 1990:187).

Thailand being an integral part of the global economy has benefited somewhat from the dynamics of capitalism and experienced rapid industrialization as well as social transformation. Here we should not forget the force behind the economic miracle of the country which lay the role of the emerging Thai middle class and especially the women in various streams. In some way, this miracle brought the system of consumerism which has resulted in the commodification of almost everything, including both material and spiritual culture.

Table 11: Percentage of Workers in Private Sector by Size of Establishment, Level of Occupation and Gender, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Establishment</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Department Manager</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
<th>Non Supervisory Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-299 persons</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-499 persons</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-999 persons</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 persons and above</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By looking at the available data and resources, it draws out that still quite a few women who worked in government services have assumed top-level posts such as Deputy-under-Secretary, Director General, Hospital Director, Secretary General etc. The situation is true even in the private sector too. The argument here is that when we considered the theoretical notion of equal status of man and woman of the Thai society, then we could also find equal representation of women even at higher levels of job hierarchy both in public and private sectors. But unfortunately the available figures are predicting and giving different pictures as male members are dominating in every stream and hold the authority and power.

**Concluding Statement**

It is believed that the position of Thai women is high as compared to other Southeast Asian countries but when looked deeper it tells a different story. Women has always been treated as second citizen in the society whether in the early period or in contemporary world. We can see these clearly in the government’s policy and programme i.e. social issues were included in the third plan, and in this plan interest on women, were primarily focused on family planning issues only.

Furthermore, Thailand has experienced considerable cultural impact and social transformation as a result of globalization. The most notable effects can be seen in the changes in cultural understanding by various social groups in conflicting and contradictory relationships between self, family, and community on the one hand and between the state and localities on the other. Above all, the concept of adoption of the use of family names through the male lines after marriage also exists in the society because of the influence of westernization and modernization.

It cannot be denied that globalization brought various transformations into the life of women in Thailand. Since 1970, along with the rapid economic development, there has been a considerable progress among the Thai women resulting from comparatively equitable cultural traditions. However, certain groups of women remain at a severe disadvantage compared to men and consequently their potential to contribute to national development is often overlooked and always been ignored. It is therefore apparent that
globalization gives benefits to only few sections of the society especially men. Women have gained much more attention than earlier with the coming of globalization but not for its betterment rather targeting them as cheap labour without any compulsion of labour laws and other regulations. Therefore, it will not be wrong to say that most of the women are suffering, and discriminated in every sector with this transformation process of globalization.

The problems encountered by Thai women with the coming of globalization are because of the negligence of the Thai government to some extent i.e. interest on women’s issues by the government and policy makers became apparent only after the United Nations declared 1975 as the International Women’s Year and 1976-85 as the women’s decade; inclusion of youth and women development program only in Fourth National Development Plan (1977-1981). After the student coup in 1973 (Pongsapich 1997:32), the 1974 Constitution was drafted and it is considered to be the most advanced Thai Constitution from the point of view of women. Fortunately, the groups working on “women and law” succeeded in changing some of the laws including ninety-day maternity leave (45 days without pay); nationality for children born in Thailand of foreign fathers with Thai mothers; and prostitution law giving harsher sentence for owners and managers of sexual enterprises. Other issues being pursued but not yet successful include abortion and rape. Not only these, Government of Thailand acceded to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 with reservations concerning seven articles. Many reservations have been removed then, due to tremendous pressures from different directions including NGOs who are working on women issues.

In case of Thailand, partial deconstruction of the social meaning of gender relations yields, in the sense that, traditional matrilateral-bias social system where women seem to have authority in certain domain, the concept of power and authority in a particular space (beyond the household compound to include the market place) has been recognized. Even if it has been diminishing more and more as foreign or non-Thai influences (Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Western) came in, it is possible to imagine a reconstruction where similar power and authority of women and men is reinstated. Therefore,
historically, (Ibid: 43-44) traditional bilateralism with matrilateral-biase made way to patriarchy as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism came in. The matrilateral/patriarchial-biasness put emphasis on the role of women and the expectation from women to take care of the families and the parents. One observes more recognition of women in Thailand and other Southeast Asian societies than in other Asian countries. Yet, patriarchy prevails. In the earlier periods, women rulers and heroines were the forms of recognition of women’s positions in traditional society. Before modernity came in, inequality and exploitation was seen within the family. However, it was the matter of family only but with coming of globalization with its strategies i.e. modernity, market economy it is quite pertinent to see that women are discriminated visibly in various modern sectors and added multiple burdens on their shoulder. Therefore, it is true that after adopting market economy and capitalistic form of development, various forms of inequality and exploitation became more commercialized and transnationalized in Thai society.

It is presumed that traditionally, Thai women are active and mobile with full right and freedom without any limitation. There were no marked preference of boy over girl child in the family, freedom to get married of her/his own choice and right to get divorce, easy sex relations, bilateral kinship, and families were largely organized around women. At present, many of them enjoy a higher rate of participation in every sector. Therefore, in the perceptions of others, Thai women are treated fairly and equally in several ways but in actual way they have been taught about their role and duties since their childhood making them familiar with cultural environment and practices. It was even the pride of some women to make their husbands comfortable and satisfied. It is therefore clear that Thai women are still treated as second class citizen and are the one responsible for the household chores. This situation is partly due to the social construction and their role in the society which is still widely prevalent in the Thai society. The roots of patriarchy have never been removed despite the changes that come in modern Thailand. They (women) could never ever escape from the system of patriarchy. Also traditionally, in Thai society, women see themselves as unique and separate individuals. Women have always been defined by their relation to others- being supportive and compassionate.
toward others and placing more emphasis on responding to and taking care of the needs of others than on taking care of their own needs. This concept of social construction has led to many disadvantages in terms of the welfare and status of women in the Thai society despite their maximum contribution in the national income. Above this social construction and prevalence of patriarchy under which women are discriminated, the process of globalization added more and more burden on women by treating them as cheap labour and second class citizen in every sector. Besides, the economic development process (accompanied by environmental destruction and Bangkok-centered growth) in Thailand has affected a large number of women negatively i.e. losing their environmental subsistence base. They migrate to Bangkok where they mostly find jobs in the informal sector or some low-paying unsafe occupations. Therefore, the process of globalization is using women especially young unmarried women as cheap labour for the benefit of developed countries. Therefore, directly or indirectly, the transformation under the process of globalization negatively hits Thai women in every departments.

It is however said that the whole process of development and globalization has a contradictory impact on women. No doubt, many women are getting opportunities like new industrial jobs, liberty in scores of angles, money, new status, opportunity and freedom and better access to health and education. But still women are engaged in jobs with low skill and they are paid quite less than average. They end up working in health hazard prone areas where they are concentrated at the bottom level of employment list. Therefore, they have been kept out of the decision-making process. Despite economic growth in the country and number of women workers in several fields, there is hardly any impressive improvement in the condition of women in the area of politics, religion, law and the military. They have limited control, power and choices over many sectors.

Because of globalization with its strategies of market economy or profit making, it brought about commodification and consumerism of women in the market which finally end up with spreading number of prostitution in Thai society. This statement is supported by the inclusion of the definition of Bangkok as a city known for prostitution service in the Longman Dictionary in 1994. Women of Thailand are severing down into the
problem of AIDs which is taking away their life. It is said that Thai women are better in position as compare to their counterparts. However, it does not mean that they are free from the patriarchal structure of Thai society. This problem has become wider and making severe issue by the process of globalization in various forms, by using them as cheap labour and brought the concepts like consumerism and commodification of human flesh especially for women. That is why, it is proudly articulated by Thai women that Thai economy is survived at the back and sweats of women. Therefore, it will not be wrong to say that Thai women are facing number of problems despite contributing enough shares in the national development and income of the country in this whole process of transformation under globalization. Therefore, it is said that globalization and the development process in the transformation period of Thai society, negatively affect the status of women.