

## **The Role of Thai Women in Local Development**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the roles of women in local development and analyzed what motivates them to participate in local activities. Three case studies were included in the study. In-depth interviews were used for data collection. The obtained data were analyzed by content analysis. It was found that women with various degrees of status, educational backgrounds, and living conditions were involved in their local communities' development. It was found that their motivation to participate was seeing the opportunity to earn extra income as well as leading the economic growth of their communities. Self-esteem was also found to be a motivation for women to devote themselves to their local communities.

**Keywords:** Role of Thai women, participation, local development

## **Introduction**

Currently, the role of women in developing local communities or villages has changed; it used to be that 100% of the role belonged to men but now there is more involvement of women in developing their localities and communities. As a result, the numbers of women who are community or village leaders and committee members have increased. Previously, the women's role was mainly housekeeping, but that did not mean that they were not involved in any local or community activities. The power of women who did not hold any position as local or community team leaders was a major factor in driving so many activities to become successful. These activities covered traditional and cultural festivals, occupational promotion for the community or village, and housewife group activities (Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development, 2013; Ngowkham, 2011; Padnoi, 2010). The above-mentioned activities can be a mechanism for helping Thai women to learn public affairs, and many of them volunteer for some duties instead of men, e.g. being a village headwoman or village committee member; this could include taking a position with an area of responsibility as a sub-district or local leader like a mayor or chief executive of a sub-district administrative organization. Also, some of them participate in political elections for the position of chief executive of a provincial administration organization, which is one of the highest positions in local administration. The change in the women's role is regarded as a development of their own role among women who are interested in social development and want to see their locality and community change for the better. Some believe that if problems are not solved, they would become more severe, such as drug abuse, domestic violence, social problems, starvation, and administrative corruption. There are three main factors influencing women's decisions on involvement in local and community development, i.e. education, individual and family economy, and experiences from collaborating with other people in the locality or community. Over the last ten years the government, non-governmental organizations (NGO), private sector, and political sector have driven women from all educational levels and professions in the provinces, districts, sub-districts, and villages to get involved in local and community development (Jullapech, 2005).

This article highlights a perspective on their experiences in collaborating with diverse groups in local and community affairs, e.g. male and female groups at the village, sub-district, district, and provincial levels including organizational groups, and the public and private sectors. The objectives of this study were to investigate the roles of women in local development and analyze what motivates them to participate in local activities.

## **Role of Thai Women: From an Assistant to a Community Responsible Woman**

Women have always played background roles as assistants in community or village affairs, in which they have been accepted by both men and women themselves when they have shown determination and responsibility. As a result, nowadays, when a community needs to nominate someone for higher responsibility or a more difficult job, women may be approved and deserve it. They sometimes offer themselves for a responsible task because they believe in their own self-potential. Actually, the proportion of women in rural society

who offer themselves to be responsible for community or village tasks is lower than that of men, which can indicate that in rural society men always stand ahead of women; however, the situation is changing into a rural society where women stand beside men (Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development, 2013).

Women are responsible not only for tasks in the community or village, but also for those in their families, so many of them have to learn to adjust themselves to carry on with their additional roles. The self-development of women who attain status with higher accountability relies on a networking experience in developing women to achieve higher potential. Thailand previously has had a network that operates with the aim of improving women's potential backed by government and non-governmental organizations, groups of people, developers, and independent scholars. Nevertheless, those involved in developing women reflect that community-based development of women can lead to success because women who are given a chance to learn can meet the needs of women and community development. It is usually said that women have to develop their potential before taking community responsibilities. Most of them become involved in working for the community, village, and society, where they learn and develop themselves. In other words, none of them wait for the chance of self-development to gain more confidence before taking a role in their village, community, and social accountability (Benchakhan, 2016).

Whenever women are asked to be involved in village, community, and social tasks, this indicates that they have enough potential and are so acknowledged. If any community or locality requires more involvement of women in development, activities and tasks within the appropriate environment should be created for them to participate in. The following section focuses on the issues that a community and society have to understand, including discussing the creation of community activities of various types and opportunities, to welcome women who lack confidence but who have decided to be a part of the activities.

### **Opportunity Creation to Promote the Role of Thai Women in Community Involvement**

Thai women in rural society mostly complete only compulsory education. After they leave school, some of them still live in their village doing rice or crop farming and gardening as well as taking care of parents and grandparents. However, others are responsible for earning money to support the family by working in urban areas as employees, shop assistants, and housekeepers including working in provinces where so many factories are located such as Samut Prakan, Ayutthaya, Nakhon Ratchasima, Bangkok, etc.

Thai women who still live in their villages will have more responsibilities when they get married and have children, but they can be given an opportunity to be involved in village and community activities at the same time; they may be involved in a housewives' group as a member or in some other aspect. The opportunity of community activity involvement arises from an invitation from other women who are friends, as well as members of housewives' groups from all generations and even from men in the community. Community activities are diversified, e.g. traditional festivals, religious ceremonies, and the creation of occupational groups for people to earn extra income to support themselves and their families. Apart from supportive occupational activities, there are plenty of activity groups which are formed based on the size of the village or community, such as savings groups, sufficiency economy groups,

household accounting groups, exercise groups, health and sanitation groups, and volunteer groups (Thattaphan, 2010; Boonpiem, 2012). In the case of large-sized communities or villages, there are more varied activity groups compared to medium- and small-sized villages. Group involvement of women can be an indicator of opportunities and a channel for success in developing as well as promoting women's potential to be involved in community and local development. Potential development consists of the development of basic knowledge and skills including driving their potential to higher levels. Strong and sustainable community activity groups, in particular, can lead to a higher level of women's involvement due to the trust among groups (Ngowkham, 2011). If a group is at an initial stage, the role of functional and natural group leaders will be important in inviting women to get involved in community activities or tasks because Thai women basically lack self-confidence in being a part of locality development when they face an administration led by men. However, when one of the women aspires to get involved in community or locality activities, it is a good chance for all group leaders to have to plan together for the development of women's potential.

Developing women based on a community context and potential arranged by community leaders in collaboration with a women's development organization, from both government and non-governmental organization sectors, is more successful than development arranged by only one party. The author considers that the success of development mainly depends on organization and the community. In other words, organizations outside of the community, such as the government and non-governmental organization sectors, should act as supporters and counselors. The way to develop the promotion of women's potential can be consistent with the knowledge, problems, obstacles, and situations they know about based on their lives in the community (Boonma, 2008; Thattaphan, 2010).

Chalermruttiwat (2016), who studied local political participation among women in Rayong province, found that the level of local political participation among women was at a low level. The women participated in voting and expressing opinions on politics, organizing interest groups, and public political demonstration. It was also found that there was no statistically significant difference in the level of local political participation among women with different marital statuses. However, it was found that there were statistically significant differences in the level of local political participation among women with different ages, occupations, levels of education, monthly incomes, and social group memberships. It was reported that the women in Chum Saeng municipality, Rayong province did not see the importance of political participation because they thought that political participation was the males' role. When their fathers or husbands took such a role, the women should not have to do anything. Their view was that the women should take the roles of mother and housewife only. Chalermruttiwat also found that women with a higher level of education (bachelor degree) showed a higher level of political local participation. Siewthaisong and Narot (2018) studied the background motivation and role of local female politicians in Buriram province, together with the problems and obstacles in taking on political roles, and then proposed guidelines for the development of administrative roles of female politicians. The data were obtained from the in-depth interview of eleven local female politicians in Buriram province. It was found that : 1) The background motivation and roles of local female politicians arose from motivating and supporting 6 factors; (i) family, (ii) socio-economic status, (iii) work

performance, (iv) politicians and interest groups, (v) community people, and (vi) one's own interest. It was also found that the outstanding roles of these local female politicians in community development had two aspects; they were the development of the quality of life and the preservation of the environment and natural resources. Moreover, the female politicians were also found to have outstanding characteristics in their manners and human relationships. 2) Regarding problems and obstacles in taking political roles, five aspects were revealed ; (i) physiological femininity (ii) duty bound to family (iii) political rivals (iv) leadership styles, and (v) values of the culture and society. 3) The guidelines for the development of the roles of local female politicians should take into consideration eight functions; (i) having enthusiasm for the roles and readiness for the roles, (ii) creating a good image for oneself, (iii) developing one's own capacity, (iv) campaigning for more influential roles for females in politics, (v) changing opinion concerning values relating to females in politics in order to promote public acceptance, (vi) using femininity to gain an advantage in administrative work, (vii) accepting other people's opinions and providing opportunity for public participation, and (viii) getting involved in activities in both individual and community affairs.

In order to gain an insight into situations concerning women in local development, case studies were investigated. The data were obtained from in-depth interviews. The obtained data were analyzed by content analysis and reported in a descriptive manner.

### **Three Cases of Thai Women in Local Development**

From interviewing three women from three different areas of responsibility, the author has found that women of any status, of any level of education, or living anywhere can always create a role in developing their village, community, and society.

The first case is Manidtha Viengpak, a woman in northeastern Thailand serving as a leader of an occupational group at the sub-district level. Initially, she worked with a few female friends applying the sufficiency economy philosophy, developed by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, to group activity management and the group members' way of life. Currently, the occupational group has been expanded into all 14 villages within the sub-district. She is also the leader of a sub-district occupational group supporting members to earn more money and have a better quality of life by producing high-quality products for consumers.

The second case is Khanungnit Makchuchit, a Thai Muslim woman serving as a private organization development officer in the three southern border provinces of Thailand since 2002. She formerly started her work in residential development which became the Baan Mankong Collective Housing Program. When the unrest occurred in the border provinces, she and community leaders and members sought a solution based on Islamic principles to create involvement for all community members so that they could systematize their community and lead to innovation under a project named Community of Faith, Kampung Taqwa.

The third case is Sirirat Srichana, a woman in northeastern Thailand serving as the headwoman of a big sub-district. Previously, she was one of the members of a sub-district administrative organization for two terms and occupied the village headwoman's position for

a year and a half. Now, she has been in the position of a sub-district headwoman for 8 years. From her experience in the role of local development, she has expressed the opinion that the strong points of women when they have to be responsible for a task are carefulness, meticulousness, tolerance, and sacrifice. As a sub-district headwoman, she additionally expressed her view that her major role is public service delivery.

### **Manidtha, Leader of Occupational Group “Kaset Takorn Ruam Chai Samakki” of Sa-at Sub-District**

As the leader of an occupational group which is officially named Kaset Takorn Ruam Chai Samakki, Manidtha is responsible for taking care of 6 occupational groups. Apart from these groups, there are groups for the development of quality of life called “continuous promotion groups”, e.g. a savings group, organic vegetable group, volunteer group for the care of the elderly, etc. There are 275 housewives involved in the groups. All groups implement the sufficiency economy philosophy in their work from the planning process to activity operation.

The outstanding role of Manidtha as the occupational group leader is giving priority to products so that all groups can earn money from selling them. The major strong point of which she is proud is the inheritance of local wisdom for handicrafts. The group members joined together to form a silk weaving group and Thai herbal compress ball group. To preserve valuable occupations within the community, the local wisdom is transmitted from generation to generation.

The Kaset Takorn Ruam Chai Samakki group has systematically learned about production, and the members practices what they have learnt. The group members have found that any product should be made of local raw materials which are natural and homegrown to reduce the costs of production and extend the creation of added value. The first product is from the brown rice group and Hang rice group; 100% of the members’ practice rice farming and can earn 5-6 baht from selling a kilogram of paddy, but they can earn 50 baht from selling

a kilogram of brown rice and 60 baht from selling a kilogram of Hang rice. The next product is from the cattail mat weaving group. The cattail is a kind of plant that grows alongside a wastewater treatment pond belonging to a factory located close to the village. The cattail is used by the housewives’ group instead of sedge to weave high-quality mats, because sedge has become a rare material in the community. For health and sanitation promotion, such as the organic vegetables group, all members promote the growing of vegetables for feeding their families. They not only eat safe vegetables, but also sell or distribute them to hospitals. Another group is the growing herbs group, which has the same goal as the organic vegetables group.

A Thai herbal compress ball is produced to be sold to the general public, and the health promotion hospitals within the district always order and buy the product.

As the Kaset Takorn Ruam Chai Samakki group has become more stable, the housewives from other villages have visited and learned from this group, so that the occupational group is being expanded into other villages both inside and outside the sub-district. As a result, the role of Manidtha is concerned with the development of incomes and

quality of life for community members of both genders and all ages. Also, the process of community development originating from local materials has become successful and welcomed. This is indicated not only by the prizes awarded by many organizations, but also by the admiration and acceptability from other people both inside and outside the community.

### **Khanungnit, Private Organization Development Officer in Pattani, One of the Three Southern Border Provinces of Thailand**

Khanungnit started this job in 2002 when the three southern border provinces were still peaceful. Her duty was developing the residences of people in the community under the Human Settlement Foundation, a non-governmental organization. When the unrest occurred, she and almost all the people in the area wanted to see their homes return to normality and peace. Hence, she decided to be a part of this process and founded the Kumpang Taqwa Network to change the way of community development by applying Islamic principles to activities. Working for a long time, she has found the changes in the situation are too hard for any one party to solve. This leads to the four pillars of each community being formed into the principles of community development comprising a village headman/woman, religious leader, local administrative organization, and natural mainstay which has become an innovation for development named Community of Faith, Kampung Taqwa. Now, it has been extended into 40 villages in the three southern border provinces.

The main concept of Community of Faith, Kampung Taqwa is that all activities have to be based on religious principles. In other words, the religious principles are at the core of developing the community so that it becomes stronger as well as the effective administration of society. However, it is important to rely on cooperation from both male and female community members at the community stage by counting on the mosque as the center to solve and promote the community systematically. Co-opinion from the committee can be used as a commitment in collectively running activities.

Khanungnit additionally claims that Community of Faith, Kampung Taqwa can induce Thai Muslim women to get more involved in community activities. For instance, the savings group based on the concept of the development of self-reliance is an important activity that promotes women to show their potential in financial management, making money, and expenditure management for their family and community. Additionally, there are the health care activity that promotes women to grow organic vegetables for their good health, and the Kiro-ati learning activity in which community members have to be jointly responsible for an invited teacher's fees. The activity of selling local goods in the mosque provides a marketplace on every Friday under an agreement among people in the community that other stores must be closed on this day. In addition to the above-mentioned activities, there are many other activities for community contribution created by community members.

Nevertheless, activities which are certified to be put into practice must implement the Islamic principles on "doing good" and "having respect for God". Basically, women in the community strictly believe in these principles, so this can lead to an effective practice. It can, therefore, be said that women play an important role in Community of Faith, Kampung Taqwa.

### **Sirirat, Headwoman of Bua Yai Sub-District, Providing Service, Caring, and Counseling for People**

As a sub-district headwoman, Sirirat is directly responsible for local development at the sub-district level. In taking this position, she places importance on keeping close relationships with individuals, groups, communities, and networks both inside and outside the sub-district. These relationships are accepted by her superior and the people and provide the integration between her leadership and femininity in her sub-district headwoman's role, which is not often found in Thailand.

Service and care are Sirirat's strong points. Also, she is careful and patient and gives people advice to overcome their uneasiness. As a result, people believe that "any problem, Sirirat can deal with it"; this can promote her role of an outstanding community leader who has become relied upon by her superior, organizations, networks, and the people.

The role of the sub-district headwoman includes keeping peace in the community such as home visits and site inspections (at night), in which she works shoulder to shoulder with police and government officers under the Ministry of the Interior. For her routine work, she oversees official policies from the government sector and other organizations being put into practice in her area of responsibility.

When she has to carry out some tasks without a sufficient budget having been allocated, she is supported by the people whom she has closely helped for 18 years through her contacts with housewives' group and others. In other words, she can be successful because those people give their time and money to support her.

With regard to the drug abuse problem affecting the education of young people, Sirirat, who has created a good network in the community, is usually informed about this problem by community members. She then coordinates with her network i.e. the school directors and students' guardians to find a proper solution. When the author asked her how she could help prevent drug abuse and truancy among young people, Sirirat said that drug-related laws were ineffective for the current situation, so she emphasized that all families had to be strong. However, parents had to work in urban areas to earn money to support their families, so family estrangement was a big problem. On the other hand, she positively believed that women could improve this situation by the warmth of their feelings for the children, i.e. a family-based cure.

In terms of the role of women in local development, as expressed by Sirirat, Thai women are presently more skillful than in the past but still keep their feminine characteristics of meticulousness, carefulness, and high responsibility. If women are given an opportunity to get involved community affairs, the community could gain not only the usual products, but also other different products through women's ideas.

According to the three cases of women who make a difference in three different jobs and areas of responsibility, the first woman, Manidtha, does not hold any position, the second woman, Khanungnit, has a responsibility only, and the third woman, Sirirat, possesses both a position and responsibility. However, these three women have the same determination in the development of harmony and a better quality of life in their own communities with the cooperation between: 1) Manidtha and the Kaset Takorn Ruam Chai Samakki group, 2) Khanungnit and the Thai Muslims in the three southern border provinces of Thailand

through Community of Faith, Kampung Taqwa, and 3) Sirirat and the people in Bua Yai Sub-District.

## Conclusion

Women who work for the locality and community are given pride as their prize for dedicating themselves to a role or position in community tasks. There are two main points to consider when women get involved in the activities: 1) the family economy and how they can earn extra money to support the family, and 2) self-esteem in devotion to the local community.

In the case of earning extra money, women are particularly interested in getting involved in occupational groups because their agricultural occupations, rice or crop farming and animal husbandry, provide a chance for them to earn money depending on the harvesting season or stage of animal development. Thus, when they are parts of these groups, they can earn money from selling products every day or week or month. It can be said that women can have more financial freedom through their work. In the meantime, the mechanisms of the groups can promote the members to cooperatively share ideas, designs, creations, production, solutions, and development. This kind of work can contribute to the happiness and enjoyment of women while getting involved in groups. Moreover, the mechanisms can lead to the development of women's knowledge and skills through several methods with support from the community itself or other organizations which benefits women themselves including their families, groups, villages, and communities.

In the case of women's self-esteem deriving from working for their community or locality, the author believes that women have promoted themselves in their goal of development. Development leaders at all levels usually confirm that women with self-esteem can be involved in village and community activities with self-confidence and perform their duties actively and effectively. In addition, they are ready to face and deal with any problems confidently.

The conclusion on the role of women in local development is that support for the community plays a role in creating activities and tasks to persuade many women to step out of the house and join community activities.

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