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**THE ROLE OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN ENHANCING  
WOMEN'S POLITICAL AWARENESS: A CASE OF THAILAND**

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## THE ROLE OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL AWARENESS: A CASE OF THAILAND

*The achievement of full equality for women is a matter of justice and of human rights; it is also necessary so that the society can mobilize all its forces for social progress and especially for efforts of development. The world cannot afford to waste the great resources represented by the ability and talents of women. This is the thought that should be constantly in the minds of those responsible for decision in communication.*

*(McBride, 1981, p. 191)*

### Introduction

Women and media have a strong relationship to each other. Women enjoy learning a number of information from the media and using them as the entertaining source. Media, on the other hand, create, shape, disseminate, reflect and reinforce the values, worldview, and women's image from diverse perspectives.

Although the relationship between women and media seems to be of equal value, a number of media studies has shown that mass media play the "backlash" role toward the development of women to their achievement in careers and personal lives. In Thailand, the backlash role of media includes reinforcing the traditional stereotypes of women such as submissive housewife, creating the new image of women's beauty without brain or brain without beauty, relating the concept of freedom to the expression of women's body in the public, and leading women into violence. The main reasons of the criticisms include that mass media, i.e., television, radio, magazines, newspapers, etc., represent the one-way dissemination of information from the sender to different audiences and that the media industry, which is dominated by men, seeks to assign the underrepresented role to women.

To date, the world has entered the so-called "information age." The advancement of new communication technologies has dramatically closed the frontiers

among countries. Throughout the world, the proliferation of communication technologies, including internet, satellites, mobile phone, etc. make the global information networks possible, like what McLuhan calls “the global village.”

In the village of the global society, the innovation of communication technologies are powerful sources of social change. People can learn the most update news and information throughout the world within the shortest period of time. People can globally exchange their views, ideas, ideologies, experience and concerns with one another without any barrier in terms of distance.

With the reference to women, the arrival of new communication technologies and the disappointed with the submissive portrayal of women in the existing mass media envision scholars and practitioners optimistically that new communication technologies will at least enhance the gender equality. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to investigate the above phenomenon in Thailand. Specifically, the paper seeks to explore the extent to which gender equality exists among Thai women and men; the extent to which Thai women access and utilize new information technologies; and the extent to which new communication technologies promote political awareness among Thai women.

### **To What Extent Gender Equality Exists Among Thai people?**

Thailand, a country in Southeast Asia, is an independent nation with no history of Western colonization. Thai society is generally characterized as being an affiliation-oriented society with a loose social structure (Boonsue, 1989; Komin, 1990; Mulder, 1994; Phillips, 1965; Thongthew-Ratarasarn, 1979). Komin (1990) defines an affiliative society as “a society in which people are highly dependent on each other and find their security in dependence and patronage rather than individualism” (p. 13). In an affiliative society, Thai people put a great deal of effort into fulfilling their friendship, love, warmth and social acceptance needs as they have low levels of self-confidence, self discipline and self-respect, and are highly dependent on others



(Wichiarajote, 1973). In addition, they seek to avoid conflict by hiding their intentions and feelings behind a “social cosmetic” of politeness and smiles (Mulder, 1994). This characteristic leads to feelings of disappointment, insecurity, frustration and individual loneliness, increasing the need for social affiliation.

The affiliative characteristics of Thai society exemplify Thailand’s “loosely structured” social system (Embree, 1950). According to Embree, Thai people: (1) allow for considerable variations in individual behaviors; (2) are less concerned with their rights and duties; (3) have little sense of long-term obligation; (4) have no strong sense of obligation in family relations; and (5) lack regularity, discipline and regimentation in their lives. Thai tend to have individualistic personalities in this loosely structured social system; they are self-concerned and have relative freedom of behavioral choice in society (Phillips, 1965).

As a result of the loose structure of Thai society and the individualistic characteristics of Thai people, Thais seldom demonstrate loyalty to anything beyond their personal values. To avoid conflict, people try to maintain a cool temperament, or what is known in Thai as *jai yen* (Mulder, 1994). Thai people also remain indifferent or unexcited (*choei*) when confronted with crises in life (Komin, 1990), especially when they have no power or influence over those crisis (Mulder, 1994).

In Thailand, men and women are equal legally. However, in reality, Thai cultural patterns reflect the double standards of behavior between men and women. The submissive role of Thai women in the society is reflected both in Thai belief and in reality. For example, a Thai proverb compare a couple as an elephant, saying that the husband is like the front legs of the elephant, while his wife is like the elephant’s back legs. It means that women need to follow and be supportive to her husband, like the back legs which is following the direction where the front legs is leading.

Buddhism and Brahminism are the major philosophy and ideology that influence Thai life. Both religions contains several obvious gender and cultural biases. For example, Buddhism refuses to allow women to enter monkhood, holding that

women are reproducers and sustainers of the household and are important in maintaining the family cycle (Boonsue, 1989). Bhrahminism, on the other hand, reinforce the concept of person's in the world. According to Bhrahminist cosmography, one's position in life is determined by *Karma*. *Karma* is a belief that one is responsible for one's own "salvation" built up in previous existences (Mulder, 1994). Karma provides an explanation for inequalities among people. For example, if the husband has an escort, his wife need to conform that it is the fate of their family. Also, she need to accept that there is little chance that she can change anything.

In the contemporary society, the separation of sexual roles still exists. Thai culture tells its people that men belong in the public domain, while women are primary responsible for the family's well-being (Teerawichitchainan, 1997). The traditional married women are perceived as reproducers and sustainers (Boonsue, 1989). The society expects married women to be reliable, reasonable, and accountable for the smooth functioning of their household (Van Landingham & Grandjean, 1994). Thai children also learn from their families that their father is the more powerful figure in the household (Teerawichitchainan, 1997).

To date, many Thai women work outside their home. The society expects that women to play "double" roles in their life, as a good professional worker and a good housewife. It means that Thai women need to work much harder and have more responsible than their ancestors. However, it does not means that most of the women can break the "glass-ceiling." For example, in the six decade of modern Thai politics, women comprise only 2-10 percent of female senators, 8 percent of district chiefs, and 1.7 percent of female village head (Ekchai, 1996).

### **To What Extent Thai Women Access and Utilize New Communication Technologies?**

The term "new communication technologies" is most frequently used for the modern technologies of communication, especially those reflecting applications of



computers, telecommunications, or their combination (Williams, 1987). The contemporary communication technologies possess at least six distinctions: Interactivity, mobility, convertibility, connectivity, and ubiquity (Tofler, 1990). These new communication technologies include computer network (Local Area Networks:LAN), internet, mobile phone, satellite, facsimile, fibre optics cables, cable television, etc.

The advancement in new communication technologies has made the equipment smaller, more compact, with higher efficiency, but lower cost (Petchsuwan, 1996). In Thailand, people can now access, utilize, deliver, or exchange information with the global community easier, and quicker. For example, throughout the country, Thai people can enjoy distance learning from the satellite television in school or at home. They can subscribe pay-cable television channels for news, talks and entertainment worldwide or use their mobile phone to call home from anywhere in the country. They can do a para-traveling or searching information internationally by using the internet. However, a little doubt exists whether women and men have equally accessed to the communication technologies.

To date, the issue of the relationship between new communication technologies and gender in Thailand has not been addressed, documented, and opened to the public in any sustainable fashion (Osborne, 1994). Nevertheless, in terms of women as a receiver, the recent surveys on the use of mobile phone among Bangkokians (Ittanubakin, 1995), and a survey on the uses of World Wide Web among Thai students (Littongpitak, 1997), show that male and female with similar socio-cultural background can access and utilize new communication technologies equally. This results may be in contradictory with the number of Thai women joining the “on-line” internet forums, which are dominated by men (Teerawichitchainan, 1997). This situation may reflect that women culture who do not play the active but passive role in accessing and utilizing information. In addition, the question of information access are critical, when comparing women with high and low socio-cultural background.



Since new communication technologies are perceived as “commodity,” only women who can pay for their cost can be able to access to the technology. This situation may, in turn, widen the knowledge and social gap among Thai women.

In terms of women as media producer or media owner, the number of Thai women who work in the media industry or own the media business has increased. In addition, the number of female students in communication is three times outnumbered male students (Siriwasak, 1992). However, the mainstream media industry belongs to men. Most of these mainstream media content in news, magazines, movies, songs, etc., are also produced from the male perspectives. The content, therefore, are perpetuated and disseminated with traditional stereotype women. We need to watch for the future whether or not the glass-ceiling will remain, and whether or not new information technologies are used to create a new cheap female labour potential by telework and homework (Frissen, 1992).

### **To What Extent New Communication Technologies Promote the political awareness among Thai Women?**

Thai people perceive the activity of getting involved in the politics as “playing” a political game (*Len Karn Muang*). However, they believe that politics is not a game for girls, but a game for boys. The Thai national political system, therefore, is dominated by men.

Thai women are a very small minority in the parliament. According to Ekachai (1996), the female member have never accounted for more than seven person of the parliament. Part of the above situation reflects the traditional belief the women belong to the “private” domain, while letting men to be responsible for the “public” sphere. The role of Thai women in political activities is, therefore, to support men. According to Fishel’s study (Ekachai, 1996), Thai women join the politics by working hard behind the scene as “campaign managers.” His study indicates that mothers play an important role in soliciting votes for their sons from the network of connection.

However, in order to get involve in the in the policy decision-making, more women need to get into the politics, directly or indirectly. In addition, women need to empower themselves and voice their needs, concerns, decision on their right, roles, values, and status to the public policy maker.

The new information technologies has its distinct in the interactive role of information exchanges between senders and receivers. In addition, the power of control has shifted from the sender to the hand of receivers, who are able to access, select, process, and deliver information suitable for them from different place throughout the world. The arrival of new communication technologies also bridge the public and private domain together, meaning that people can use their private space at home disseminate information to the general public. New communication technologies, therefore, can be perceived as the tool to liberalize and democratize people, especially women from the routine and supportive role.

The questions are: What the new communication technologies do for Thai women, especially in terms of political awareness?; Do Thai women perceive political awareness as the activities of getting involve in the politics as a “supporter” and using them as a new tool in campaigning her “man”? Or do they think that new communication technologies provide them with their “own” channel of communication to voice their concerns to the policy decision makers? Do they think about their own right and roles in joining politics themselves, instead of supporting “men.” Unfortunately, there is no literature in Thailand addressing this issue at the present time.

### **A Promise of New Communication Technologies: Women Development?**

The appearance of new communication technologies is making a promise for women development. However, new communication technologies cannot make and change for women unless women perceive their values and effectively use them.



At least, a number of following activities need to be taken into action in order to liberalize women from the male-dominated society.

**1. Linking grassroots women groups in the countryside with the interactive communication networking.** Interactive communication network, such as intranet or internet, will be the forum of discussion among the active “opinion leaders.” They can use this long-distance forum as a stage to empower themselves, to stage women’s mission, to search for new information women need to know, or which they have right to know, to envision the Thai women’s right, roles, values, and status, and to make a decision on what they should do.

In addition, the women networking should not focus only on individual human rights, but also on their community rights to protect their local environment (Ekchai, 1996). This activity will develop and establish the respects nature and local female villagers’ right in managing and being responsible for their own hometown, and to change the traditional perception on gender inequality in the long run.

**2. Encouraging the participatory uses of new communication media.** With the coming of new communication technologies, woman should not only rely on the traditional and the mainstream media in a cooperative, community and commercial framework. The new media technologies provide an alternative to empower women in fighting against the underrepresented portrayal of Thai women in the media and in strengthening their equal status in the society. With the new communication technologies, the power of media gatekeeper has been shifted to the active and participatory audience. Internet, for example, becomes one of the new media channel that Thai women has developed and used it to fight against the false stereotype of Thai, to downright sexual harassment in the cyberspace, and to voice their indignation (Teerawichitchainan, 1997).

**3. Encouraging all women to actively participate in communication networking and their community’s activities.** New communication technology is the source of linkage as well as a source of separation. Although such new

communication technology as internet allows the interaction at distance, it has the limitation of physical appearance. So, women should not be the heavy passive media consumer, or dependent on the new technologies, without socializing with others in the community. Instead, women should enjoy their active role participating in media networks, actively share the information with others, and actively involve in their community programs.

**4. Promoting the alternative media programs for women such as community television, community radio, internet-online forum and encourage women to involve in the program.** These programs should be interactive or life in its nature. The programs should be supportive the equal status of women in the society. The program producers should promote and provide information, which women need to know, or which they have right, which help them answer questions affecting their daily lives, problems, needs, and roles in society. Women should participatory utilize the advantage of technology to express and exchange their views, perceptions, thought, and intention with one other on their rights, roles, and social responsibility. The considerations and suggestions from the above interactive programs need to be taken into action.

**5. Encouraging women's grassroots participation in policy making at all levels.** At the national level, more women need to be represent women's voice in the parliament. According to Mechai Viravaidya, the famous "Mr. Condom", women should stop grumbling about discrimination, but should get into action by using every communication channel for campaigning all female candidates in the general election (Ekachai, 1996).

At the community level, the advancement of the technologies provides a convenient channel for women to communicate with politicians. With the media technologies such as telephone, facsimile, internet, etc., women can easily reach the politicians and sharing their concerns in any policy making. Women can also join the life conversation of the politicians in the mainstream media, by calling, sending fax, or



e-mailing to the program, and expressing the views, opinions, suggestions on the existing issues. The combination of the new media technology with the mainstream media provide the forum for women's participation in policy making.

**6. Advocating the reengineering of the male-dominated system.** Accord to Dr. Chermesak Pinthong, outspoken Thai economist and media celebrity, the politics must begin at home. He believes that the political concept at home, such as the clear-cut separation role and power between a married couple, perpetuates women's subjugation (Ekachai, 1996). Every family need to replace the traditional male and female role with the concept of equality and democracy in the family life.

**7. Creating the atmosphere that learning is the ongoing process and never-ending story.** Women should not stop learning new things once they are finishing their school. Instead, they should enjoy acquiring and being aware of new information from the mainstream media or new communication technologies as their valuable resources.

**8. Developing women's communication competency in indigenous knowledge and in informal networks.** In order to prepare women for the change in new communication technologies, the training programs need to be offered, especially for the less-advantages and the technophobia women. The topics should include the analytical thought, how to-information, strategies for selecting valuable information and dealing with information overloaded, etc.

### Conclusion

It is apparently that new communication technologies are crucial component of the infrastructure needed to facilitate and to organize the development of Thai women. The transfer of information without frontiers give Thai women more power to exchange aspects of their concerns, opinions, and perceptions. They can also recorrect the misperception of the male-dominated society.

As women are treated unequally to men for a long time, both women and men are grown up with the concepts that have already established in the society. In order to change the traditional perceptions between women and men, time, personnel, and communication technologies are needed. More women need to participate into the government, business sectors, and media industry. We should re-engineer the male-dominated system at home and in the workplace. We should teach both of today's women and men and those of the new generation about the value and the equality of human beings. They should be trained in the way that they respect each other as a person, without the concept of degradation, sex object, etc. New communication technologies should be the major tool in liberating the communication system and the society from gender biases in the areas where women are traditionally excluded.

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