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Using New Communication Technologies To Promote Women's Participation In Democratic Processes

By

Suteera Thomson
Using New Communication Technologies to Promote Women's Participation in Democratic Processes

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Thailand performed very well on the human development index (HDI) of the UNDP's Human Development Report 1995 (UNDP, 1995), moving from the medium HDI rank to the high HDI rank. The HDI indicates whether people lead a long and healthy life, are educated and knowledgeable and enjoy a decent standard of living. However, Thailand performs miserably on the gender empowerment measures (GEM) which examines whether women and men are able to actively participate in economic and political life and take part in decision-making. Thai women are grossly under-represented in national politics, in national and local administration, and in the shaping of public policies which have a direct impact on their lives and welfare.

This paper attempts to describe how a small policy research institute has utilized new communication technology to carry out its work in involving women in democratizing political development. The paper begins with an overview of the situation of women's participation in the democratic process. This is followed by a description of the nature of new communication technology and how it has been used as a tool for promoting women's participation in democratic processes. The paper ends on the prospect of using a satellite to provide political education for women throughout Thailand.

Women's Participation in Democratic Processes

One of the most important areas in which women exercise the democratic process is politics. Most people tend to think that women are not interested in politics. Such a conclusion is probably correct if we take the number of women contest elections as the criterion. However, participation in politics covers both electoral and non-electoral activities. This includes running as an election candidate, voting and campaigning, following up on political issues and providing recommendations and suggestions to politicians.
Candidates in National Elections

The change from the absolute to the constitutional monarchy in 1932 enabled women and men to stand for election. It was not until the by-election held in 1949 that the first woman candidate, Mrs. Orapin Chaiyakarn, ran and was elected (Thomson and Bhongsvej, 1995a). In 1955 when the political party law was enacted for the first time, election candidates had to contest according to the political parties to which they belonged.

Subsequent general elections saw a greater number of women contesting for elections. However, the percentage, as compared to that of men, was very low (Thomson and Bhongsvej, 1995b). In the past six elections since 1983, the number (1,463) of female candidates has been less than 10 percent of the number (15,864) of male candidates (Table 1). On average, about five percent of female candidates were elected as MPs. The July 1995 election was the exception, when more than ten percent of the female candidates were elected, the greatest number in the election history. In the Thailand's 63 years of democracy, it has only had 124 female MPs (2.87 percent) as compared with 4,185 male MPs (Table 2).

Voter's Participation

Voter's participation is a factor which clearly demonstrates that women may even be more active and interested in politics than men. The March 1992 election, when sex-segregated data on eligible voters were
compiled, there were 400,000 more eligible female voters than male. Of these, 300,000 more women voted than men (Thomson and Thomson, 1993). Women made up 50.62 percent of eligible voters and 50.82 percent of voters (Table 3).

Women's votes cannot be overlooked as they can have a decisive effect on election results. Information on the number of eligible female voters, if outnumbering male, can be used by the political parties as a strategic resource to gain more seats. If political parties recognize women as a constituency, women's issues will also be explicitly featured as election issues. For the July 1995 election, there were altogether 32,211,605 eligible voters and about 600,000 more women voters than men (Department of Local Administration, 1995). The greater number of voters could partly be attributed to the fact that Thai women on average live 5 years longer than men.

**Participation in Non-electoral Activities**

Thai women's interest in politics is not less than that of men as seen from an activity organized by the Gender and Development Research Institute in the national elections of September 1992 (Thomson, 1994) and July 1995 (Thomson and Bhongvej, 1995a) in collaboration with a few daily newspapers. A day before the election day, readers were asked to identify a female candidate from each political party who would be elected. Readers of both sexes sent in replies in more or less equal numbers. In addition, women increasingly expressed their political views and opinions in public fora by phoning into radio programs, writing articles to newspapers and participating in seminars and political meetings.

It can be concluded that at the transactional level of politics, women can be regarded as politically active. However, in electoral politics, a substantial increase in the number of women is needed.
The New Communication Technology: a Tool of the Gender and Development Research Institute

The Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) is a non-partisan, non-profit and private organization active in policy research and policy advocacy on issues that have an impact on women's lives and welfare. Established on the United Nations Day in 1990 with the initial support of UNIFEM, GDRI has implemented programs to enhance the full and effective participation of women in the decision-making process which in effect will lead to an equitable society for women and men. The GDRI also serves as a Secretariat of the GenderWatch Group (GWG), a network of organizations nationwide, mandated to follow up on the implementation and enforcement of the policies of the government or political parties on women's issues. One of the GDRI's five objectives is "To promote democratization of political development by broadening the base of women's participation in public life" (GDRI, 1995).

The GDRI undertakes activities to fulfil its objectives by using gender information as a strategic resource to increase the visibility of women in the development process and to advance the status of women. Through the use of personal computers, the GDRI has established gender information in key areas of economic, social and political development. A commercial basic software, e.g., Microsoft Excel, has been used for making graphics to visually display and conceptualize quantitative data. This has proved to be a simple and useful tool for most of the GDRI's work.

The Thailand Gender Profile includes (i) general background information pertaining to gender issues in Thailand's development; and (ii) information on specific areas at a greater depth, e.g., areas under investigation on policy options. The areas include population and family planning, health, education, labour force and migration, economic activities, and legal and political rights. The current status of women in the above areas are compared with the past, and the progress and changes are monitored and recorded. Information in each area is gathered according to major dimensions of socio-cultural composition such as female—male, rural—urban, time and age; and key development problems and priorities.
The New Communication Technology: Women's Participation in Democratic Processes

Gender information has been used as a strategic tool for raising awareness and concerns leading to increased women's participation in the democratic process in a number of areas. These include: (i) mainstreaming women's concerns into the national decision-making arena; and (ii) ensuring the implementation of the government's policy.

Mainstreaming Women's Concerns into the National Decision-making Arena

Women are a major driving force in the economic, social and cultural development of the country. Their contribution has been significant yet women have not enjoyed equal opportunities and treatments with men in many aspects. Discrimination against women is still prevalent and has caused a number of concerns. These need to be voiced and dealt with. Mainstreaming women's concerns at the top policy level requires full awareness of and sensitivity to the plight of women, strong commitment, and political will among policy and decision-makers.

Making Women's Concerns an Election Issue

i) The 1992 National Election

In 1991, 18 women's organizations jointly concurred that there were several women's concerns that urgently needed to be addressed based partly on the GDRI's study entitled "Gender Issues in Thailand Development" (Thomson, 1991). The three pressing issues were discrimination against women, low status of women workers and problems related to sex trade. Later, on August 16, 1991, the Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) organized a meeting entitled "Policies of Political Parties on Women's Issues" attended by leaders or representatives of political parties (GDRI, 1991). Grassroots women leaders from various regions taking part in that meeting highly valued the dialogue with the politicians. Similar meetings were then subsequently organized in 10 provinces throughout the country enabling the election candidates to share their views with the public (Thomson, 1995).

This was the starting point when political parties began to outline their policies on women to the public. The August meeting and the request
that GDRI, some women's organizations and the Female Parliamentarians Group made to the government to address women's concerns, resulted in the explicit inclusion of women's concerns in the government's policies. On October 21, 1992, the Prime Minister stated that the government would rectify laws relating to job discrimination against women, improve the working condition of child worker, and eliminate child prostitution. That was the first time that issues of concern to women were incorporated in the government policy statements.

ii) The 1995 National Election

Four pressing women's concerns were identified, using the approach similar to that for the 1992 election. These were: (i) Participation of Women in the Formulation of Administration and Development Policies; (ii) Ratification of Thailand's Reservations on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); (iii) Women Workers in the Informal Sector; and (iv) Sex Trade (Thomson and Bhongsvej, 1995a).

Several activities were organized to ensure that voters were aware of both women's concerns and what should be expected from the political parties to ensure that women's agenda was included in the parties, platforms.

Pamphlets highlighting the four issues as outlined above, supported by gender information, were prepared. More than 60,000 copies were distributed to the political parties, women's organizations and women leaders. At a number of meetings that were held in relation to the election, the pamphlets were distributed.

Voters and the general public had access to information regarding women's issues through articles published in several newspapers and a few radio and television programs which featured discussions on issues of women's votes.

Encouragement was given to women leaders from various provinces to organize fora inviting local election candidates to speak. These were aimed to pressure candidates to commit themselves to addressing women's problems and interests. Pamphlets were provided to serve as the base from which further ideas could develop and further questions could be posed.
A forum was organized in Bangkok for political parties to state their policies on women. Invitations were sent out to leaders of six major political parties to appear in a TV program entitled "Policies of Political Parties on Women's Issues". It was televised live on Channel 1. The event took place on June 16, 1995. The five female representatives of the 5 political parties, namely Chart Thai, Chart Patana, Democrat, New Aspiration and Palang Dharma, all addressed issues of women's concerns and indicated that their party prioritize issues and would tackle the problems facing women to the extent that it was possible.

**Implementation of Government Policies**

Having the policies without any mechanism to monitor their implementation, does not bring about any fruitful results. The GenderWatch Group (GWG) came into existence so as to follow up the actions taken by the government and the political parties according to the stated policies. The GWG, established in March 1993, is composed of members from over 100 organizations such as non-government and government organizations, academic institutions, trade unions and the mass media, throughout the country (GWG, 1993).

One of the GWG Group's major activities is to monitor government actions on the stated policies on gender issues. In 1992, these were: discrimination against women, child labour and child prostitution. These resulted in: (i) the appointment of, for the first time, a female provincial governors, deputy governors and sub-district officers; (ii) the Cabinet's endorsement of legislation on child prostitution and the trade of children penalizing for the first time customers who use the services of the prostitutes under 18 years old as well as increased penalties for "brokers".

**Using New Communication Technologies: the Prospects**

The power of information is awesome. Very basic technology such as personal computers, used for creation of gender information has undeniably a far-reaching impact. The earlier discussion demonstrates how gender information has been strategically used to positively impact women, laying down the foundation for further effort to increase quantitatively and qualitatively women's participation in democratic processes.
In the final analysis, for Thailand, one cannot deny that much remains to be done in the democratization process. The task poses a real challenge for those involved in the effort to increase women's participation in political development.

However, opportunities do exist and can act as enabling forces for the successful future effort in this respect. These include:

1. Favourable Environmental Context:
   
   1) Since early 1995, women's rights have been guaranteed in the Thai Constitution, through much advocacy and persistence of the women's movement. This legal equality is an essential precondition to advancing the women's cause.
   
   2) The current government's policy on women stated in the Parliament on July 26, 1995, entails the promotion of women's participation in all spheres including politics.
   
   3) The government's adoption of the United Nations Platform for Action at the Fourth World conference in September 1995 is also another facilitating event.
   
   4) The 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan being formulated has as its focus human resource development which should serve well as the frame for greater empowerment of women.

2. Availability of New Communication Technologies:

   Opportunities are enhanced with the advanced communication technologies if such technologies can be applied and put into good use for the promotion of women's participation. Among the technologies include the satellite "Direct-to-Home" television broadcasting.

   **Political Education for Women through Satellite**

   For the promotion of women's participation in democratic development, i.e., to ensure that they exercise properly their right to vote, to stand for election and to participate fully in other non-electoral political activities, there is a need for political education particularly for women.
Women must be convinced that in order to play a decisive role in the democratic process, they have to become aware of their power and their interests and act accordingly. This will involve increasing their participation as candidates and in voting for women and men who represent women's values and interests. They need to be aware that there can be no better advocates of their interests than they themselves; they have a civic responsibility to participate in formulating the policies that affect their lives.

An increased awareness by women of their political role can be achieved if women have a better attitude towards politics and realize that jointly they can influence the political process. Women as a group, if properly educated, can constitute a positive force for democracy.

Unless women are properly educated and vote accordingly, it is unlikely that equality can be obtained.

To provide political education to the voters, particularly women, may seem a formidable and cumbersome task through conventional means. With the advanced communication technologies, the task may look somewhat simpler particularly if the infrastructure already exists as in the case of Thailand.

The instructional radio and television broadcasting has been in existence in Thailand since 1964. However, recent advancements in communication technology has brought in satellite television broadcasting which makes information readily accessible to audiences even in remote areas.

The satellite television broadcasting is currently launched by the Ministry of Education for its distance teaching of informal and non-formal education programs. In fact, educational television programs through more conventional means have been in existence in Thailand since 1964 (Non-formal Education Department, 1994). It was estimated that in 1991, there was one television set for every 2.3 households (TDRI, 1991). In addition, in research on the educational television programs, it was found that educational programs were viewed by 42 percent of the population and the majority of these viewers were in the age range of 8–18 years (Non-formal Education Department, 1993).
With such supporting data, there is no doubt that if political education is taken as a priority option to increase women’s participation in democratic process, it could be made easily accessible to the targeted population particularly through the existing communication technology facilities that already exist.

All the major ingredients required for the launching of political education as a means to increase women’s effective participation in politics are available. The only remaining, yet vital item, which is still not transparent, is the political will of the government to involve more women in the democratic process.

Conclusion

Promotion of women’s participation in the democratic process is not an easy task, particularly when the prevalent societal attitude particularly that of women, is that politics is the business of men. Awareness-raising among all concerned parties – the government political parties and the public through gender information, in spite of the favourable impact it has created, provides a necessary but not sufficient condition for greater involvement of women in politics. Political education is required for both women and men. The priority however is on women, taking into account that on the whole, men have, up to now, been more politically active. Communication technologies from basic personal computers to more advanced equipment will play a pivotal role in democraticizing political development. More importantly, communication technologies can serve as very important strategic tool for greater involvement of women in democratic processes.

Success should not be too far fetched if a deliberate effort is intensified by all parties to increase and improve women’s participation through optimally utilizing all the available resources which could facilitate such efforts. The government’s policy in this regard needs to be translated into practice and progress in its implementation needs to be closely monitored by all the advocates for women’s political involvement. Women’s networks, regarded as a means to provide women with the kind of contacts that form the basis of political power, constitute one very significant component of the successful drive towards full and equal participation of women in the democratic process.
An essential precondition for a democratic society for Thai citizens, made up of women and men, is an increase in qualitative and quantitative participation of women in politics.
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