Women and the Family in Thailand in the Midst of Social Change

Juree Vichit-Vadakan

The author argues that in Thai society, woman- and family-related issues fall outside the direct domain of law. The family as a subsistence unit has been challenged by opportunities for wage labor in cities and towns. These opportunities, which have dispersed the family unit and eroded the authority of parents, have been particularly advantageous for women, who are seen as good workers, obedient and undemanding. Yet the power of the family as a psychological unit in Thailand has not altered. Likewise, although women have made gains in the market and the workplace, the possibility of achieving greater parity with men is hindered by the continued psychological force of the traditional "beauty culture," their historical place as appendages to men, the cultural devaluation of manual work, and the religious definition of women as polluting. While the law is not irrelevant to these issues, they are neither determined by law nor are they likely to be altered by legal change.

At a glance, Thailand today looks like a typical modernizing society. In the urban centers, particularly Bangkok, skyscrapers rival each other along the skyline. Big-name hotels and plush restaurants abound. True, signs and symbols of traditional society are found everywhere, mixed in with the modern trappings. But the blending of new and old creates certain confusions and tensions. Some are covert, and even those that are manifest are not necessarily stressful and dysfunctional. Nevertheless, explanations are much needed. In two major areas of Thai life, critical and careful analysis is particularly important—namely, changing family relationships and the changing position and status of women in society.

The Thai Family

Family relationships have been profoundly affected by changing socioeconomic conditions—so much so that we must reconsider the nature of the Thai family. Scholars who have studied

the Thai family over the past two to three decades have generally concluded that in its ideal form it is a modified extended family with matrilocal residence. Married daughters tend to bring their husbands into their parents' household to work and live. An extended family may eventually dissolve when a daughter's family grows large and breaks away to form a new family unit. Ideally, females are the center of the family to which they are related by blood. This situation is what Sulamith Potter (1977) calls a female-centered system.[1]

Given the flexibility that Thai attach to social situations and social realities where impermanence and transiency reign supreme, social arrangements and social organizations inevitably manifest variations. In every setting, from a village to an elite compound, various family arrangements may in fact exist. The ideal family structure has remained more or less constant, however, despite the multifarious forms found throughout society.

A family can be perceived conceptually in terms of degrees of distance from ego. Generally, a family consists of ego's spouse and children. But unlike the Western nuclear family, a Thai family includes ego's parents and grandchildren (if there are any). Furthermore, especially for unmarried individuals, a family invariably includes siblings as well. In other words, those who constitute a family in the Thai context include relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces, and grandparents) who may be living together with ego or who have been close to ego at some point in ego's life. Who is included or excluded depends not on exact kin relationships but on personal relationships. Relatives form a pool of people close to ego, but an individual ends up having certain relatives as members of his or her family as circumstances in life dictate.

Family in this sense provides an individual with support, comfort, a sense of belonging, an identity, and a set of expectations that he or she would not have vis-à-vis others in society. Put differently, Thai derive psychological and moral support from their families. In times of need, they seek out the family for assistance before they seek out other persons or institutions. When an individual is the repository of a family's high expectations and indulgence, his or her needs may not be fulfilled by other family members fully and readily on each and every occasion. Thai may verbalize frustrations, disappointments, and even anger with fam-

---

[1]   Kinship and family in Thai society have been studied over 40 years. Because of the flexibility with which Thai treat kinship and residence patterns, Western scholars have been confused by the lack of a clear pattern of family structure and kinship relationships. In addition, stretching the concept of loose structure and using it too broadly has led to certain misunderstandings of Thai social realities. Sulamith Heins Potter's *Family Life in a Northern Thai Village* (1977) is a major empirical study that set straight the issue at hand. Subsequently Thai scholars, such as Amara Pongsapich have come to accept Potter's analysis of the female-centered family and kinship system. The Thai family in these latter studies is viewed as a unit that cycles repeatedly from small (nuclear) to large (extended) back to small.

ily members and relatives; still, family and kinship are central to everyday Thai life.

Socioeconomic Realities and the Changing Thai Family

Over the past 25 years Thailand has been drawn increasingly into the global economy and social system, and the macro changes in society have had direct and indirect influences on social relationships. During the Vietnam War, Thailand was a major service center for U.S. soldiers. American dollars created boom towns with related business activities; bars, night clubs, sex partners, rental dwellings, goods, and other services were provided. In a situation unprecedented in Thai history, a large segment of the poor flocked to expanding urban centers to exchange their bodies and labor for cash—a switch from their previous rural, agricultural livelihood. When the U.S. phase subsided, changes in the lives of a large number of people were irreversible. Bar girls, for example, found it difficult to return to the rice fields. Internal migrations proliferated as people who were used to serving foreigners searched for new places to offer their services.

As Thailand industrialized, migration to industrial sites occurred rapidly—mostly to the Bangkok metropolitan area and adjacent provinces. Industry recruited young people of both sexes, with a preference for women in many export-oriented industries such as textiles, because employers found women to be good workers, obedient and undemanding. To serve both local and foreign clientele, the service sector of the Thai economy has likewise expanded, and, not surprisingly, the rank and file of the service sector is filled with migrants from the rural areas.

Large outward migration from villages inadvertently altered rural society and family relationships. For one thing, villages underwent significant demographic change. Young to middle-aged people of one or both sexes are increasingly absent. Older people and children are left to fend for themselves in many rural areas, though relatives in cities and towns send them money. Families are united on rare occasions, such as the New Year's or the Songkran festivals. Otherwise, a family is a dispersed unit, tied together by sentiment but not by day-to-day contacts, or joint activities.

Besides migration to the cities, there is external migration: the exodus of villagers to work in foreign countries—Japan, the Middle East, the United States, Taiwan, and anywhere else that pays unskilled, semiskilled, and skilled workers more than they would receive in Thailand. Initially, more males went abroad to work. Later, Thai women followed. Many women have been lured into or have willingly entered the sex trade.

How has the family been affected by all these changes in Thai society? Many who left agriculture—not just bar girls—have

found it difficult to return to the harshness and tedium of farm activities. Earnings from agricultural products lag behind the rise in price of other consumer goods. And increasingly, agricultural activities require more and more capital investment in the form of pesticides and fertilizers, which further impoverish agriculturists. The yield of the land is poor, so the family as a semi-subsistence unit is challenged by opportunities for wage labor in cities and towns. Young people right out of school can become independent income earners, albeit at the low income levels associated with unskilled work. The meager income from the land would go further if not so many mouths had to be fed. Still, whatever savings the migrant children can send home are a much-appreciated addition to the family coffers. Young migrants to the city with whom I conducted interviews unanimously expressed their pride and satisfaction in giving money to their parents and family instead of asking for money, as they had to when they lived at home.

The independent incomes now earned by members of the family have effectively reduced the function of the family as a productive unit and have also somewhat eroded the authority of parents, especially the father as head of the household—at least in the sense that the father no longer maintains total control over children's choices and decisions in life, such as marriage, job changes, and migration decisions. But the family as a psychological unit has not lost its central place, in spite of economic and social changes. Migration for the sake of jobs and income and especially seasonal sojourns in cities have strengthened the role and place of family in the individual's psychological universe. Living in an alien setting among unfamiliar faces with people whose norms and life situations differ from their own motivates migrants to look to their family members and kinfolk for comfort and support. In fact, romanticization of the virtues of family and village often runs out of proportion when migrants are lonely and unhappy in town. Living with relatives or with a fictive family—unrelated persons with whom a family-like relationship has been developed—is very common. Migrant workers in town spend their precious free time visiting each other, even though a trip may require hours by public transportation. Contacts with fellow migrants appear to consume migrants' free time.

We begin to understand why fictive kinship has become a mechanism of social differentiation, a way to distinguish strangers from people who know and are familiar with one another. Commonality of place of origin is an important mark of differentiation. Kinship and family have thus adapted to the changing socioeconomic conditions.

Women's Position and Status in Thai Society Today

Women are visible in most spheres of Thai life. They are in markets as vendors and buyers; in factories, mostly as unskilled or semiskilled workers; in offices as clerks, secretaries, and typists; and in the professions. Women professors are found in all fields, but they are overrepresented in the arts and education and underrepresented in engineering and the sciences. A superficial examination might thus yield the conclusion that women are hardly discriminated against in Thai society or that women's position and status are not problematic. Thai men often joke about how the generals in the armed forces must subjugate themselves to the "generals at home"—their wives, who are in charge of household matters.

Although women in Thai society are better off than in many other societies—for example, in the South Asian countries and Japan—their position and status still need to be improved. Women do not rise to the top positions in either the public or the private sector. They fill middle management positions but not usually positions at the top decisionmaking level. Few women hold high administrative positions in academia; with a few exceptions, deans, vice-rectors, and rectors are men. Very few women have broken into the traditional male domain of politics; women have never numbered more than 5% of the House of Representatives in almost 60 years of parliamentary democracy. Few women have been appointed to the upper house or to other political offices. To put it simply, while Thai women are visible in most spheres of activity, they do not rise to the top echelons within each sphere.

What, then, prevents women from equaling men's achievements? What holds women back from fulfilling their potential? No single reason is adequate. Rather, a combination of interrelated factors explains the present situation of women in Thai society. Let us untangle the factors.

First, in traditional Thai society, only men were admitted into royal service—a privilege that simultaneously brought status, title, and prestige. Ambitious men could try to climb upward with the means available to them. Women, however, were seen and treated as appendages to men, especially among the noble and royal families. Within the "inner domain"—household activities were assigned to women—they had to exercise, and express their need for, prestige, power, and privilege through men: husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, grandsons. Direct means to achieve social and political goals were not available to women. Dependency on men was eventually translated into a set of norms and values that emphasized the superiority of men to women, the natural weakness of women both physically and emotionally, and the volatility

and unpredictability of women's emotions, which could influence their judgment.

Scheming for desired goals became an integral part of a woman's upbringing. How to humor and cajole men or break down their resistance, how to be submissive to men yet manipulate them, became a flourishing art. In this context, women could assume some amount of power, either to control and manipulate others or to enrich the family coffers by gaining favors from their husband for those who sought them through women intermediaries—hence the much-maligned "back-door" syndrome.[2]

A second factor is that socially women have been assigned a place lower than men, which means that a family's meager resources will tend not to be invested in a daughter. The result is less education and less training in skills for girls than for boys. As women enter the job market outside the agricultural sector, they find themselves in low-paying jobs with little chance for on-the-job training that would elevate them to better jobs with more pay. Associations for women of different social strata are few. In other words, women in general do not find themselves in situations that help them improve their lives. Stimuli and opportunities for self-improvement are lacking.

A third factor is that culturally women from traditional Thai society have been socialized into the "beauty culture." That the ultimate feminine asset is beauty has had a long tradition in Thai society. With Western cultural influence, beautification has been elevated to unprecedented heights. To be eternally beautiful requires full-time attention and energy. From the top of the head to the last little toe, Thai women who can afford to engage in beautification with great zeal. The number of beauty parlors in every town and city can surely attest to this fact. Women try everything, from hairdressing to skin nourishment, from fat reduction to face lifting, from eyebrow tattoos to eyeliner tattoos—the list runs on. But why would women allow themselves to be so treated and even abused, not to mention the loss of dignity and the risk of possible injury and harm to the body? Because beauty is satisfying, because a good appearance provides confidence. I am certain this partially answers our question. But more important, beauty is viewed as a woman's passport to happiness in life, beauty increases her chances of getting a good husband, beauty is seen as essential to retaining a husband's love.

In the past, Thai men were allowed to have many wives and concubines. In fact, women were presented to kings, royal relatives, and high nobles when these men became powerful. Physical prowess as expressed in sexual prowess was seen as the concomitant of social and political power. A woman, as the sexual partner of a man, thus shared his status. A major wife was in the-

---

2 It is commonly alleged that although a public official may appear honest and forthright, his wife may open the "back door" at home to receive bribes.

ory entitled to the privileged status of overseeing and supervising all minor wives and concubines. In this context, women became rivals for a man's affection and attention; women were pitted against women, even, in some instances, against their own blood sisters. Inevitably, deep-rooted mistrust and envy arose among wives, as well as among sons and daughters of different mothers who shared the same father. A lack of solidarity and camaraderie among women must also have taken root.

Another cultural value helps to perpetuate a woman's role as merely the wife or mistress of a man. Hard work or physical labor has a low status, befitting only those with bad karma. This value perpetuates women's choice of an easy life, preferably in a job that does not involve manual labor. Being a minor wife, a mistress, or even a prostitute is seen as less strenuous than working on the farm or in the factory or as a maid in the home. In addition, a minor wife or a woman in the sex business usually dresses up to be attractive as part of the requirements of her work, which allows for the satisfaction of being pretty.

A fourth factor—already mentioned—is that women hold little formal power because they have been inadvertently excluded from decisionmaking in politics and administration. Lacking high positions with authority attached to them, women must exercise informal power through men. Many husbands in positions of power tacitly permit their wives to exercise power, too, as long as a reasonable amount of discretion and propriety is observed.[3] In fact, men in such positions use women to amass wealth and also to blame should their questionable acts be found out.

Women must subjugate themselves to men, at least overtly. Thai women have done this quite successfully. Women hold themselves back in competition with men, either consciously or unconsciously. Perhaps this is why in a different realm and context women take on male roles—as in altered states of consciousness, when female spirit mediums are typically possessed by male deities and act like men, drinking, smoking, swearing, and engaging in all forms of vulgarity deemed unsuitable for women. In the state of spirit possession the usual cultural norms are suspended, and the medium is liberated from the confines of his or her sex.

A fifth and final factor is that the impact of religion on women's status and position is profound, yet subtle—not readily or easily identifiable. Thai Buddhism has thrived and continues to

---

3 The wife of a public official is often allowed to carry on a number of activities, many of which may be economically remunerative. Whether her activities are independent of her husband's influence and interference is a matter of great doubt. She benefits from his position, making observers wonder if there might be a breach of ethics or propriety. Increasingly, therefore, women tend not to be viewed as self-interested operators who act independently of their husbands. The husbands must have tacitly approved of, if not quite assisted in, their wives' activities. Perhaps some husbands might even orchestrate their spouses' activities to better family finances. In other words, it is unfair to put the blame for profiteering and exploitation of power and status for monetary gains on women alone.

thrive on account of women who support the monks, temple activities, and the socialization of children as bearers and supporters of the religion. Without devout women, monks would starve, and temple activities and merit attainment would cease to operate. Women cook and prepare food for all religious activities for both monks and guests. But the place of women in Buddhism is secondary to men's. A woman, even a female child, must not touch a monk. All physical contact between the female sex and the monks is forbidden. Hence, a monk may not accept an offering directly from a woman; a monk's seat may not be used by a woman—the list of dos and don'ts is extensive. The fundamental reason for these prohibitions is the purity-pollution dichotomy. Women are viewed as polluted because of their menstrual blood. Young girls and old women are not excepted, possibly because of the former's potential to become polluted and the latter's history of having been polluted.

Fundamentalist Buddhists would rationalize that those who are born female have lower karma than men from the outset. It is the belief that a woman must suffer and must learn to bear her suffering bravely so that she may be born a man in the next life. Many do not seem to question this belief, treating it as a universal truth.

Excluded from direct contact with monks, who are symbols of sacredness, women are also barred from becoming monks and therefore cannot gain merit as monks. But women can gain extra merit through sons who are ordained. Men who become monks can pass on the merit to their wives and mothers. We see again how women cannot act directly to achieve desired goals for themselves. No wonder mothers dote on their sons. The much-noted special bond between mother and son in Thai society may likely be a derivative of this mutual dependency—an exchange of a son's merit, prestige, and status for a mother's love, nurturing, and indulgence.

The point to stress here is that women's position and status in society are low relative to men's. Women are subservient to men, secondary in rank; they support men and operate from backstage; they are never direct or overt. They choose to submit to men or to take the back seat in a situation of direct conflict in, say, the workplace. In the public, male, domain, women invariably and unconsciously shy away from competing with men.

Women as Paradoxical Symbols

In the Thai cultural context, women symbolize a number of diametrical opposites. The pain and trouble of going through pregnancy and childbirth are well recognized. Children are taught to feel indebted to their parents for having given them life, but motherhood is especially extolled; children owe a life-

long debt for their mothers' milk. Love, nurturing, comfort, and indulgence are associated with mothers far more than with fathers. Psychologically speaking, the mother is a child's anchor to safety and reality.

From another angle, women are considered dangerous. Men will not walk under a clothesline where a woman has hung her laundry. Some men even refuse to have their laundry done with women's, because they fear the pollution of a skirt or underwear, which are associated with menstrual blood. Polluted themselves, women may contaminate and lessen the sacredness of Buddha images, and especially holy amulets worn by men. But more important, perhaps, is the deep-seated fear that women, with their childbearing potency, may subtract strength from men.

Thus, men fear women and hold them in awe, albeit unconsciously, in an extension of the fear and awe that they hold for their female socializers from a young age. Grown men dread the accusation of being henpecked more than anything else. But fear and awe repeatedly manifest themselves primarily in unconscious ways, because females are also the major agents of socialization in a Thai child's life. Because mothers bear the major burden of child rearing, their impact on a person is profound.

Women's potency manifests itself in many ways in Thai society. In the days of corvée labor, men were conscripted to serve their king. With the men away from home, commoner women took over their economic activities, leaving the legacy of a female presence in the local economy. And because women aspire to exercise power and control, their behind-the-scenes manipulations and maneuvers have been highly effective. Although these activities have not been direct, many women have achieved their goals. Thai women are thus potentially powerful, albeit informally.

Social institutions adapt to societal changes differently. Adaptations are propelled by a variety of factors, many of which are unforeseen, poorly understood, and not subject to control. In some instances, individuals intervene in the process of change, often using the law to help realize a particular social goal. The women-related issues discussed here all fall outside the direct domain of law; the changes in family relationships are not directly determined by, nor are they likely to be altered by, law. Likewise, issues affecting the status of women are complex and so intertwined that enacting new laws will not necessarily solve the problem at hand.

I do not mean to imply, however, that revisions in the law are irrelevant to upgrading the status of women. In the area of family law, for example, greater penalties should be imposed for illegally registering multiple marriages (although polygamy is illegal, some men attempt to formalize their relationships with minor wives through official marriage registration procedures).

Even though marriage registration laws are not observed by a majority of the Thai, strengthening the sanctions against those who do register multiple marriages and publicizing some of the violations would serve as a powerful reminder of women's equal status in society.