

HEADLINE: Redefining roles

SUBHEADLINE: In a recent seminar on strengthening female representation across all sectors of Thai society, the 'weaker sex' proved their strength

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Thailand is ranked 10th in Asia for its female representation in governance. Out of more than 1,100 towns, 81 have female mayors in a population of 31 million women. Yet the representation of women last week in the Escap Hall of the UN Conference Centre easily outdid that of men.

Some 650 women from throughout Thailand and from all strata of local governance, ranging from leaders of slum communities to members of Parliament, gathered to observe the UN World Habitat Day 2000 under the title of 'Women in Local Governance.'

Co-organised by Escap, the Gender and Development Research Institute, Building Together Association and the BMA, the one-day seminar intended to support women in decision-making positions, and launch a call for more equal and efficient partnership across the board.

'Local government is the only level of government where women can enter political life with relative ease. Women in decision-making positions in governments and legislative bodies provide 'transformative leadership' by redefining political priorities, often focusing more on the environment, human development, building and sustaining communities. Moreover, they are often more transparent, consensus oriented and inclusive in their styles of governance,' Kim Hak-Su, executive secretary of Escap, said in his opening speech.

The ability of women in helping to tackle the endemic problem of corruption was brought forward by many speakers.

Basing his argument on a report from the World Bank, Nathaniel von Einsiedel, regional coordinator for Asia and the Pacific United Nations Urban Management Programme, declared: 'The greater women's rights and the more women's participate in public life, the less public sector corruption there is. However women have to be in a position to access, interpret and comment upon local government performance.'

'Women are often more transparent, more consensus-oriented and inclusive in styles of governance. They can make especially good urban managers in the development of clean and healthy, equitable and prosperous, sustainable communities and cities,' stated Dr Chamniern Vorratnchaipan, from the Building Together Association.

Later in the day, Ubon Ratchathani mayor Penpuk Srithong, went further: 'Women are more honest. I have never seen a female leader face a no-confidence debate. If women get a chance to be more involved into decision-making levels, for sure there would be less corruption.'

Throughout the day, speakers took turns giving examples of how resourceful and dynamic women from different walks of life have managed to get out of difficult situations, for their own sake or others'.

'Women can make desirable changes in communities and in society as a whole. And this is not only women in the formal organisational structure, but women in the community who

play essential roles.. They can also be a catalytic to a better quality of life in their community," explained Dr Suteera Thomson Vichitranonda from the Gender and Development Research Institute, which has been campaigning for greater participation of women in decision-making positions for many years.

In the afternoon, living proof assembled to back up the theory of women's underrated capacities, who, explained Phitsanulok mayor Premruedee Champonod, had usually to work much harder to prove to people of both sexes that women could do it.

The Slum Women Network, represented by Orawan Jamraschai, Benjawan Chintrae and Pramon Mingkhwan, explained their ways of pulling themselves and their peers through very difficult situations. `` Since the economic crisis, women in slums are enduring a lot of suffering, especially when their husbands are jobless. As women, loving and feeling responsible for the whole family, we are the first affected. We go all-out to try and maintain the standard of living of the family," commented Orawan Jamraschai, who explained how the community managed to create a collective fund to help the members with medical expenses or to lend money with no interest.

Their joint efforts also earned them some great achievements in order to solve housing problems. `` Following eviction or fire, for example, some people might face the problem of having nowhere to stay. We have gathered money in order to rent a large place to accommodate all members [some 370 people]," explained Slum Women Network leader, Benjawan Chintrae.

The energetic Pramon Wingkwan exposed typical daily worries of life in the crowded slums, `` where picking up of garbage doesn't exist and where insects, filth and insalubrity are rampant.

`` I have gone to school only up to Prathom 4 level, but I have dedicated 13 years of my life to helping needy communities. When I hear that `women would be better staying at home', it shocks me. Women can do anything," she said, reacting strongly to the message delivered by Bangkok's Governor Samak Sundaravej earlier that day.

In the seminar's key speech, Samak darkened a little the bright picture of a strengthened role of women in urban life. Citing the example of his two daughters, the governor explained that women often had the opportunities to pursue great careers, yet most of the time, Thai society favours supporting men's work, while women are told their role is at home.

`` Thai values tend to support this family structure. It should change little by little, and what matters the most is the quality of relationships between men and women," he said, commenting that the involvement of women in politics should be considered on an individual basis.

`` We should let it develop naturally. Political candidates should be judged by their abilities, not by their gender," Samak said.

Patriarchal social systems, social and cultural prejudices, financial dependence, lack of media support, family and child-care responsibilities, are amongst the many reasons that women find it hard to be equally represented.

`` To get rid of problems such as environmental, one has to join hands all together. But this collective effort is something hard to obtain. Women usually have to ask permission from their husbands and sometimes even from their fathers," commented Phitsanulok mayor Premruedee, whose great achievement was succeeding in cutting by half the amount of garbage disposed every year in her province (from 162 tonnes a year, to 70 tonnes at present), quite an exceptional feat, considering that the amount of garbage is steadily rising in today's consumer society.

``When it comes to casting their ballots, women are more active. Yet when it comes to electing women leaders, everyone disappears. One goes rather for a man. I think women's abilities are not widely accepted," the mayor said.

``Women in their own ways are leaders anyway. They have usually succeeded in holding their family together. When they have a mind to do something, they can do it," added Mayor Penpuk of Ubon Ratchathani, calling for less jealousy and pettiness in women's decisions.

``The experience of women in being spouses and mothers is extremely valuable. Their strengths lie in empathy for society, working with their hearts, sensitivity and brains," commented Duangnuan Tamrangsi, representative of Banglampoo's River Front Project.

With all these good resolutions in mind, and their heads still full with the brilliant and comprehensive talk given by Nathanon Thavisin, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration deputy permanent secretary, the 650 or so women scattered back into Bangkok's urban jungle.

In a country where women represent only about six percent of MPs and 10 percent of senators, the issue of women's representation should continue to attract attention. And soon, as the Asia-Pacific Summit for Women Mayors and Councillors organised by Escap, is scheduled for early next year.