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**“The role of national mechanisms in promoting
gender equality and the empowerment of women:
achievements, gaps and challenges”**
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**The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality
and the empowerment of women: Thailand experience**

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

1. Introduction

Status of women has long been recognized as a critical factor for sustainable development. Interestingly, in Thailand, King Rama the VI wrote an article from which it was quoted as saying that an indicator of a nation's development was a status of women.

Prior to the introduction of a term or concept of gender equality, improving status of women's as been discussed and practiced in Thailand for a long number of years. However, various development programmes for women were clearly specified in Thailand's social and economic development plans since 1972.

The first 20-year plan for women development was drawn up in 1982. This was used as a framework for the 5-year plans for women's development coincided with the 5th (1982-1986) and the 6th (1987-1991) Thailand National Social and Economic development plans. Such endeavour of Thai Government was timely because the U.N. declared the year 1975 as the international year for women and 1976-1985 as the decade for women.

2. National Mechanisms

As a result of U.N. endeavour, with various international instruments including the Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to reach gender equality goal. Thailand acceded to such Convention in 1985 and was obliged to apply Convention as a guideline for formulating policies and plans relating to women's well being. The national mechanisms, therefore, were needed to undertake the tasks.

Although National mechanism was originally perceived (and perhaps meant) to be within the government. However, there have been changes politically, socially and economically throughout the years, particularly in the last 5-10 years. Therefore, the following discussion on National mechanisms would be in a wider context covering mechanisms in the other sectors as well.

2.1 Administration mechanisms

The first official national mechanism, the Office of the National Commission on Women's Affairs (ONCWA) was set up in 1989 under the Prime Minister's Office, responsible for promoting gender equality. It acted as a multi-purpose tool for the government, with its role to advice the government on women development policies, implement certain measures and approaches, as well as monitor the results and situations. The Deputy Prime Minister was the chairperson of the National Commission on Women's Affairs (NCWA) which comprised of representatives from government officials, leading non-government organizations and gender experts.

In 2002, when public administration reform took place, the ONCWA was transferred to the newly formed Minister of Social Development and Human Security, which is mandated to develop, assist and protect children, youth, women, disabled, and the elderly. In addition to manage welfare and rehabilitation, the ONCWA is combined with Family Development Office and named as "The Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development", under which the Office for the promotion of gender equality was set up as its working unit.

As previously done, the new Commission appoints several committees to undertake the tasks leading to gender equality in all aspects such as committees on political participation,

domestic violence, laws. The tasks include providing suggestions, advice in policies and measures as well as monitoring the situations regarding those matters to the government.

To speed up the work, focal points for gender equality have been set up in most ministries at the departmental level with high ranking officials (director general or the deputy) as Chief of gender equality office.

2.2 Legislative mechanisms

The Thai parliament is bicameral, consisting of a House of Representatives and Senate whose members are elected.

As far as legislative mechanisms are concerned, there have always been the House and Senate Standing Committees on children, women, youth and the elderly overseeing problems related to the target groups.

In 1993, a Thai woman Parliamentarian Caucus was formed with female senators and House representatives as members. It was set up with major aim to promote and enhance the role of women in participating in political, social and economical aspects at all levels.

For the last four years, the Caucus has been actively involved in various activities. Example is:

1. Organizing seminars in constituencies where female senators or female house representatives were elected in order to create understanding and raise awareness regarding domestic violence issue,
2. Public Hearings on the elimination of domestic violence bill in many parts of the country were organized to get people involved in the legislative process.
3. Organized fund raising events for pregnant women who were dismissed from their work.
4. Lobbying, discussing with male colleagues on gender-related issues.
5. Meeting with media sector, both electronics and print media to discuss about ways and means to help each other in creating understanding and support the move toward gender equality.
6. Monitoring pieces of legislation being scrutinized in the House and Senate on the basis of gender awareness.

2.3 Constitutional Mechanism

After the promulgation of the present Constitution in 1997, several independent bodies were set up. A few should be mentioned such as the Constitutional Court, the Office of Ombudsman and the National Human Rights Commission. Although these mechanisms are set up to protect people's rights in general, but women, as one of the major groups in society will definitively benefit from them.

An excellent example of benefit women received is when the Constitutional Court made a significant decision that an article in the Name Act stipulating that women have to take their husbands' names after marriage was unconstitutional. Attempts had been made to amend this law for more than twenty years without success.

2.4 Civil Society Mechanism

Various civil society organizations were founded at different times. The active ones at the national level include Friends of Women Foundation, the Women Foundation, the Hotline Centre Foundation, the Association for the Promotion of Women Status, the Women and the Constitution Network, the Thai Women Watch Association, the Women Lawyer Association of Thailand, the Foundation for the Promotion of understanding women's health.

Each organization usually focuses on its special interests while working collectively at times when national movement is needed.

3. Achievements

Through collective efforts of all mechanisms, certain achievements are worth mentioned.

3.1. Legislation-Regulations

3.1.1. Constitution 1997 which stipulates:

- equal rights, no sexual discrimination but positive discrimination is allowed (article 30)
- rights of family members to be protected by the State from violence (article 53) State's duty to promote gender equality (article 80)
- one third of House Ad-hoc Committee scrutinizing bills related to women, children, youth, the elderly and the disabled have to be those with work experiences in related fields.

3.1.2. Name Act: a person's right to choose his/her last name after marriage.

3.1.3. The Human rights Commission Act and the Village Fund Act: both of which have a clause stipulating that in selecting a commission or a village committee, an appropriate proportion between male and female should be taken into consideration.

3.1.4 Family laws:

- Thai women's children nationality: children of Thai women whose husbands are non-Thai, can now have Thai citizenship.
- 90- day maternity leave.

3.2. Raising public awareness and creating understanding.

- Gender trainings for concerned government officials and civil society organization members
- Dissemination of information regarding gender related issues through radio, TV programmes as well as print media.
- Occasional campaign on gender equality.

3.3. Capacity building for women:

- Trainings for women candidates who run for office at both local and national levels.
- Trainings for women who run small and medium businesses.

4. Challenges in the Future

Through hard work for many years of various groups working toward gender equality, and in particular during the drafting process of Constitution in 1997, major challenges can be concluded as follows.

4.1 Persisting challenges:

- Attitudinal factor of general public toward gender equality, including women. Like most patriarchal societies, Thais are products of traditional, cultural related socialising process. Traditional social expectations of men and women still uphold. As a result, changes in attitudes, beliefs, and practices in daily life whether it be at home, workplace or other public areas are slowly happening. Although it is getting better but a goal of gender equality is farfetched.

A challenge for all of us in this regard is to search for effective but suitable ways and means to tackle this problem.

- A lack of political will, whether it comes from collective endeavour to create one or comes from within committed politicians, is still perceived as a major challenge. The facts reveal that while the present government, under Mr. Thaksin Shinawats as the Prime Minister, has absolute majority in the House, certain pieces of legislations regarding women's well-being, perceived to be obstacles for gender equality, are still unrevised or they have not been approved.

Examples are:

- Criminal Code law regarding:
 - Marital rape
 - Abortion
- Civil Code Law regarding family matters
 - Divorce
 - Non-Thai husband nationality
- Elimination of domestic violence Bill.

All major political parties, including the ruling parties, Thai Rak Thai, and Chat Thai party as well as the opposition, Democrat party already submitted the Bills approximately two years ago, but the Cabinet has yet to approve and submit its bill.

- Building up a strong constituency to support gender equality movement.

4.2 New Challenges:

- Effect of globalization which is perceived to have adverse effect on women's well-being leading to issues like migration, trafficking, governance.
- Strong cooperation between various existing mechanisms and new mechanisms.

5. Observations and Recommendations

1. Political, economical and social environment is not overall conducive for moving forward toward gender equality. While economic growth, stimulated mainly by domestic consumption has positive effect on certain groups but it has negative effect on the majority of people. This is indicated by the double increase of household debt for the past four years. This coupled with social unrest caused partly by violence in society, attitudinal changes in way of life toward consumerism, higher significance on value of money, leave heavier burden to women, in particular when men's lives were taken as a result of government's drug war policy which caused extrajudicial killing and unresolved murder cases. In addition, a government's way of solving problems in the South led to two major incidents where approximately 200 men died.

Despite the aforementioned negative impact on women, there are a few possible positive effects that should be mentioned. These include the fact that women have more access to small financial resources.

2. Recently, the various existing mechanisms have been working more closely, with the acknowledgement of the fact that each group/organization is different in terms of specific interests, thoughts, approaches.

3. In the light of a larger role played by civil society organizations and more people's participation in social movement, the national mechanisms, if it is restricted to the government sector, in Thailand case, the Office of Gender Equality as a working unit, should take a leading role in coordinating, facilitating, supporting all groups to work together toward gender equality. It should act as a coordinating centre, well equipped with updated information such as disaggregated data, research results, compilation of facts, figures, and lessons learned from other countries as well as international development in this matter.