

INTERVIEW

On Thailand Women Forum

Monday 28 June 2010, by [Isis](#), [YIMPRASERT Junya Lek](#) (Date first published: 5 March 2007).

Thai Labour Campaign's Junya Lek Yimprasert shares her insights on the recently concluded Thailand Women Forum held last March 3-4, 2007 in Bangkok. She also gave a brief overview of the history as well as the current state of the women's movement in Thailand.

Several days after the Thailand Women Forum was held in Bangkok, Isis International-Manila had the chance to speak to Junya Lek Yimprasert of Thai Labour Campaign on her insights about the forum, in particular, and about the women's movement in Thailand, in general.

Led by the Thai Labour Campaign, Thailand Women Forum served as a platform for around 170 participants to share their experiences among diverse networks of women, men, lesbian gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT), who fight for democracy, women's rights, workers' rights, gender equality, among others.

Ms. Junya Lek Yimprasert, from Thailand, founded the Thai Labour Campaign in 1990. She has written numerous articles and reports related to women workers and labour exploitation.

Isis International-Manila [Isis]: Could you share with us some of the highlights of the Thailand Women Forum held on March 3-4, 2007?

Junya Lek Yimprasert [JLY]: I think the Forum served as a real grassroots platform. It was the first time that we are dealing about women's issues, yet a significant number of men, youth, students, LGBT [Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders], worker leaders, people living with HIV/AIDS, have all come together in a forum. This forum became a meeting of different networks coming together and learning from each other.

This is the second time that we try to create this national grassroots platform to discuss women's issues and rights. So I think this is one of the beginnings in Thailand. But that is not something that we can be proud of. I think we are very much behind in terms of promoting women's rights. We have been working and fighting together for many years. But the last event at the national level that we organised was in 1994—that is, preparing people to go to Beijing in 1995.

There was no place for men at that time, but this time, women are coming in with their husband. And the husbands participate in the meetings, fully understanding the issues and the need to support their wife in the women's movement. Another significant thing is that there are a lot of changes in the rural area in the grassroots movement. In a community village, both men and women are discussing how to harmonise the village, how to stop violence in the village, how to be in a peaceful relationship.

The involvement of gays groups is also significant. And because of that, I think many people have understand that in this world, there are not just men and women but there are also other people with different sexual orientation.

And also, I think this is the first time that the Muslim women from the South came to attend. We supported about 12 Muslim women and academics who have been struggling in the South. They came to speak about another perspective. As you see, in Thailand, majority of the population are Buddhists and there is strong racism against the Muslim and the whole nation has a strong misconception about the South. They think that only Buddhist people in the South were killed. But these 12 Muslim women came and told their story and told how they have been abused.

I think we need this kind of place, a space for different networks from different areas to come together and to speak.

Isis: Let's just take a few steps back and if you can share with us the history of this dialogue. How was the event conceptualised? What was the theme and how was the theme chosen?

JLY: I think how it developed to become the Thailand Women Forum started from a project I did on gender economy as capacity building for women leaders—union leaders, farmer leaders, rural area leaders, leaders from the informal sector, and leaders in the communities. While conceptualising the forum, we realised that women from the urban and rural areas are truly different. But their sameness lies in the fact that both the urban and rural workers, struggling for their rights, have been victimised by the globalisation, by the global trade policies.

We felt that giving these women training is not enough. We realised that we should promote them to change and to come out and then to take leadership in pushing their demands forward, hence, we decided to have this Thailand Women Forum.

Isis: Given the inter-movement nature of this forum, what approaches did you utilise to facilitate discussions and dialogues?

JLY: We employed strictly participatory approach. In the two-day forum, we had a panel talking on economic, socio-cultural kind of division and its impact to women, to men, and to LGBTs. We had workshops for the participants to work together and to speak on the impact of trade policies in Thailand, how to move the country in the welfare state, worker rights, and reproductive rights.

As I told you in the beginning, the layout of the whole program, with the plenary and workshops, allowed people to listen to various issues. We made it really participatory. We decided to have very minimum “experts” as lecturers as much as possible. So actually, those who are giving their inputs or those who are sharing are the ones coming from the networks. At the end of the two days event, we are happy because of the grassroots participation.

Isis: It is interesting to note that the participants came from diverse networks, not solely from the women's movement. Given this, how would you describe the nature of the women's movement in Thailand at present?

JLY: I think we're losing the track for so many years. The women's movements here in Thailand have been working on a charity kind of efforts for so long—working with the wives of the powerful people in the country. Even the National Women Council is not concerned about class diversity and class differences.

The women's movement in Thailand started from educated middleclass, elite women who started a

charity kind of work. The real women activists have been involved in the labour struggle in the '60s and '70s. And I say, this time we succeed because we have encouraged our women friends, NGO and alliance to really understand that we really have to change our way of working—from charity kind of approach to rights-based approach. I think Thailand is very much behind in terms of laws, in terms of women participation in politics, in terms of labour participation in the decision-making bodies.

We have to start kicking up again. I think the whole country need to come back and to design a new struggle strategy. And I think Thailand's way of working through connections is not the right choice, not the way that we should do it. We should be trying to get the kind of real participation, real ownership from the grassroots level themselves. We need to change. We need to get people to realise that we need to change. We need to take power.

Isis: It's established that there are many types of women's movements and at the end of the day, the linking up still has to happen in the women's movements. How do you propose to do that?

JLY: Even though we criticise, we also recognise that the women's movements have also been working for many years. We have to get them to understand that they have to put their knowledge and expertise in educating the grassroots to be able to step side by side with them to fight.

I think many women's organisations have good intentions and good will but the way we worked before did not succeed. We need to recognise that and make this more successful by mobilising people to serve as a real force in putting more pressures for the government. We have four years to get more people to put the demands forward instead of just women's organisations who are putting the demands for women's better life. We have to get women from the worker's union, urban poor areas, rural villages, Muslim women, and the men to come in and to join in putting the pressures. I think we have to do that and set the hundred years of International Women's Day as a way to get people to feel that it's the time that we really have to move forward. It's the time that we have to seriously decide that we have to work together.

Isis: Any last words for our readers?

JLY: I have a motto that there is nothing that you can get without struggles. The 20 years of my truly committed activism working in the whole region and the whole world tell me that it's really tough to be a woman; it's tough to be an Asian woman in this global world. But it doesn't mean that we cannot change. It doesn't mean that we cannot do it. We can do it and we have to do it. And we cannot do it alone.

The lesson learned from the Thailand Women Forum is that working as a network is difficult. It takes time. It takes a lot of sensitivity and a lot of kindness. But at the end of the day, you know that you cannot do it alone. We have to really work together. Also, we have to work together in the region and to link the issues to our people and make our people and the grassroots able to get as much information as possible.

P.S.

* From ISIS International:

http://feministdialogue.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=474:interview-junya-lek-yimprasert-on-thailand-women-forum&catid=22:movements-within&Itemid=229