

Embracing Feminism in Thailand

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Shaping awareness of what it means to be a feminist in Thailand is not without its challenges, especially in a context where men cringe at the word. Feminists are threatening to undermine the status quo that assumes that women are not to question men.

For 37-year old Pern Khamwean, the word “feminist” wasn’t on her radar until her 39-year old sister used it in conversation.

“My mum had started going out with her friends and travelling more, just like my dad did when we were younger. But actually, my dad doesn’t like that my mum does this. My sister said feminism means women can do whatever men can,” says Pern, a photographer based in Chiang Mai.

For advocates of women’s rights in Thailand, feminism means believing that men and women are equal and deserving of equal opportunity and access—regardless of gender. However, this definition is widely open to interpretation with even activists having various stances on it.

There are two words people use when talking about feminism in Thai. The first one อุดมการณ์สตรีนิยม translates to “ideology” and “women’s rights”. The second more recognised term is สตรีนิยม which loosely translates to “women” and “popular”, or of particular interest. The fact that the translation doesn’t directly match the English definition has led to some confusion, with many Thai nationals perceiving feminism as a “man-hating” approach to policies that attempts to discredit one gender in favour of the other.

This can make it difficult to seek solidarity from men. Sia Kukaewkasen, a social worker, tells *New Naratif* that there’s a knee-jerk reaction among men to reject feminism, particularly as many Thais continue to subscribe to a patriarchal mindset.

“Men are the head of the household; they are the authority in our culture and women are expected to be submissive,” she says. “When we talk about who is a feminist in Thai culture, most of the time, that individual is going to be a woman.”

Gender politics in Thailand

While Thai law does recognise gender equality through the 2015 Gender Equality Act, it’s not without its issues. When it comes to implementation, the law has been difficult to enforce, and activists have been calling for amendments such as removing the second paragraph of section 17 of the Act which makes exceptions for discrimination on the basis of religion and national security.

The percentage of entrepreneurs and women in business at the leadership level is equal to men, but the same cannot be said of the political scene in Thailand. While the number of women voters outnumbered the men in the 2019 election, the political parties and candidates failed to reflect this reality: around 10,000 candidates contested the recent election, but only about 2,000 of them were women, suggesting that women will continue to be underrepresented in politics. Globally, Thailand

has one of the poorest rates of gender equality in politics, with only 5% of political representation being female—the [lowest](#) in Asia.

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While social movements that centre women and women's rights have been visible in Thailand, they rarely come from the grassroots. For example, prominent Thai activists point out that the HearMeToo movement, which sought to bring the voices of survivors of violence to the forefront, was very much led by the United Nations, without a strong base in local communities. No action took place as a result of women sharing their #MeToo stories.

"We know there are cases of sexual harassment, but no one with the status of celebrities like in America, South Korea, China and Japan stood up to talk about it. It was only the UN," explains Waaddao (Dao) Taengkliang, an LGBT activist and deputy leader of the Commons Party.

Unpacking feminism in Thailand

Unpacking the many layers of how feminism is perceived in Thailand means looking closer at years of social order and hierarchy to understand why the term is met with such immediate defiance and reluctance.

Stereotypes that suggest feminists want to be superior to men cloud the definition of what feminism could bring to the conversation; for a new generation of activists, the word "feminism" is being understood through social media rather than in Thai socio-political circles. Dao says that Thais tend to take their cues from social media and discussions of feminism on those platforms, which could lead to skewed impressions.

"Thai society does not understand feminism to a large extent," she explains. "There is the misconception that feminism is an aggressive stance on women's rights. When society talks about women, they may mention women's rights and gender equality—but they do not talk about the power structures involved or patriarchy."

Mook, a long-time human rights activist, tells New Naratif: "If you ask the middle class or the Thai public about feminism, they will go to extreme answers and say things like 'the guys on BTS (Bangkok Transit System) need to give up seats for women.' Educated, middle class Thais think that feminists want women's rights to be superior."

This approach is exacerbated by a social hierarchy ingrained through a value system which considers one's age, occupation, wealth and residence, and is organised on an assumption of "knowing one's place". Ideas of gender and sexuality are proliferated by the media and socio-cultural influences permeate both urban and rural areas.

History also comes into play. While women in the West have had to fight hard for suffrage, women in Thailand haven't had this same experience of struggling for the right to vote. In fact, Thailand was one of the first Asian countries where women gained the right to vote in 1933. "Women had to fight for so many things, like suffrage, in the West," Mook says. "But in Thailand, we all got the right to vote at the same time, so our movements, development and history is of course different."

Activists say that it's fairly common to encounter the notion that gender equality has already been achieved in Thailand. Efforts to push for women's rights on the grounds of gender equality are thus often seen as women being greedy and demanding extra privileges. "You can advocate for human rights policy, as long as you don't share feminist ideas," Mook says.

Mook adds that, for Thais to better understand feminism, the emphasis needs to be less on how individuals identify with the term and more on the understanding of what feminism means to the Thai general public. The fact that Thais generally believe their government and society has successfully achieved gender equality suggests there's a lot more work to do.

"We work with a feminist approach in our movement," says Dao. "This means we try to move forward in a way that is inclusive instead of something that is based on a hierarchy. It's reflective of a people's movement where everyone's story is important."

Feminism and politics

There are other political reasons that throw up obstacles for feminism and feminist organising in Thailand, notably the [lèse majesté law](#) as well as the sedition law, which limits freedom of expression. Organisations that depend on the state or bureaucratic establishments for their funding also tend to steer clear of overly "political" issues. This leads to situations in which organisations shy away from gender-based issues that could be classified under the umbrella of "feminism."

Dao says that work on gender equality in Thai society is often limited. When organisations work on women's issues, they tend to focus on single issues, such as sexual violence, rather than talking more broadly about gender justice. Organisations also often keep to providing direct services—such as establishing helplines—rather than looking at society at large in ways that could lead to them confronting structural issues that fail to protect women. Themes like democracy and freedom of expression are given a wide berth.

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Debbie Stothard, the coordinator of ALTSEAN-Burma, Secretary General of FIDH, a non-government federation for human rights organisations, says that the government often shies away from feminism because it adopts a rights-based approach that takes aim at structural and institutional injustice. Instead, the focus is on more targeted, individualised needs, sometimes revealing condescending attitudes. "People have this view of women as poor and needing help to secure education and support their livelihoods," she says.

"This is where we have a huge problem in the region among ASEAN countries. Women are the subjects of a development project—[it's] about increasing participating, raising their capacity, standard of living to be a good mother or wife. They don't acknowledge women's leadership. This is the issue."

But having a rights-based approach to feminism is imperative, Debbie stresses. Without this, the military might be able to act with impunity on a variety of issues, such as in Thailand's deep south, where women are impacted by forced disappearances and killings amid the ongoing conflict. The failure to see gender equality within the broader context of human rights to be respected means that feminists often also face repercussions like prosecutions and convictions.

Increasing misogyny

Stothard says that Thai politicians would previously not have made statements dehumanising, objectifying or humiliating women, but this has changed. The rise of conservative nationalism, she argues, has "emboldened male politicians to be more open and less apologetic about their misogyny."

"[Now] people feel much more relaxed about it because the bar was lowered so much more

significantly regionally and globally, “she adds.

Stothard looks to civil society to take the lead in using any space available to empower the broader population, stressing that the focus needs to be on the government accountability; particularly how they were responsible for how poverty was created in the first place.

“The politics of most Southeast Asian countries is still very paternalistic and treats poor and rural people (who form the majority of the votes) as a population that can be coerced and bribed,” she says.

A feminist future

The expectation that Thai women should be docile and leave matters of politics to men is being contested as activists work tirelessly to dismantle patriarchal attitudes and beliefs that limit women’s participation. Although women are underrepresented in politics, their contributions to business have been notable: they [occupy](#) more than one-third of CEO and CFO positions—significantly higher than the global average.

With three women [entering](#) education for every two men, a new socio-political arena is evolving as more women are calling for more equality across the country. And with public spaces become increasingly accessible, Thais see what feminism looks like and who supports it. Activists and celebrities have an opportunity to bring social issues to the forefront to create a wider dialogue.

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Moving forward with a recognition of rights for all means further explorations of what these spaces for the discussion of feminism and gender justice should look like. Closing information gaps will also strengthen women’s activism in Thailand. As activists like Dao, Sia and Mook repeatedly emphasise, feminism isn’t just for women, and an agenda shaped with this in mind can elevate other human rights issues.

While not without its challenges, the future of feminist discourse in Thailand is promising. The next generation of activists are concerned with raising awareness on issues such as consent and sexual harassment as they look to developed nations and learn from best practices in challenging entrenched patriarchal systems.

“What we’re seeing in gender equality trainings, is new opportunities on how we can work together,” says Dao. “We’re all feminists—including men and women and we’re seeing a lot of activists challenge the misconceptions of what feminism means.”

“A lack of female representation [in Thai politics] suggests the feminist movement is non-existent, but this is quite the contrary. Feminist activism is alive and well,” says Mook.

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