

## **Reconstructing Gender Identity for Political Participation: Hill Tribe Women in Northern Thailand**

Nongyao Nawarat

### **Summary**

This article aims to take a critical look into political participation patterns and concerns of female local politicians who are also ethnic minorities in Thailand. The representation of women on local councils is low throughout the country, but it tends to be a particular problem in areas occupied by indigenous, minority ethnic groups. The research is based on the hypothesis that women politicians from minority ethnic groups may have to downplay the gender dimension in public policy in order to appeal to the voters and overcome cultural barriers to entering the public political sphere. They need to show that they can project the dignity and capability of their ethnic group, win resources and information from the state, and bring this recognition and other benefits back to their electorate. The article analyzes the role of creative compromise and other coping strategies essential for women in such situations, based on a case study of a prominent woman politician in the Mae Wang District.

Manuscript received on 2010-04-15, accepted on 2010-07-20

Keywords: women, political participation, Thailand, Hill Tribe, indigenous communities, local government councils/affairs

### **Introduction**

This article contributes to the understanding of the constraints on the strategy of pursuing gender-sensitive governance through increasing women's representation in elective politics. For the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), this strategy means "working with multiple stakeholders, like women's organizations, governments, the UN system and the private sector, to bring more women into government, train women leaders, and boost women's skills to actively participate in elections as candidates and voters" (UNIFEM, undated). The article is not a comprehensive survey of this problem, but records a biographical study of a particular aspiring woman politician in a distinctive set of circumstances that brings out the complexity of a real-world situation. The woman's name is Naw Aeri Thongthungluang, and at the time of the research she was in her mid-thirties. Her interests and identity as a female are combined with those she experiences as a member of the Karen ethnic minority in Thailand, and are very much involved with the politics of land-use and a struggle for community rights as it plays out in the

upland area of northern Thailand where she lives. The study shows how, when elected, Naw Aeri has to steer a difficult course, balancing different agendas and confronting formidable obstacles.

At the national level in Thailand, women make up about 13 percent of the lower house in parliament, and about 15 percent of the senate.<sup>1</sup> This is about average for Asian countries (UNIFEM 2008: 23). Thailand also has in common with other Asian countries strong factional structures involving patron–client relationships, which mean that women often get into parliament as auxiliary members of factions of which male relatives are leaders (Ockey 2005: 60). The maneuvering of factions is at the heart of the instability of Thailand’s parliamentary system, which currently seems incapable of producing governments that can serve full terms ending in free and fair elections. In this environment, boldness and decisiveness are seen as essential qualities of a successful Thai politician, qualities that often clash with norms and stereotypes of femininity, which are still very strong (Ockey 2005: 79–80). There are even suggestions that in Thailand women are still widely seen as intrinsically unfit for politics (Chalidaporn 2006). Similar images have been passed on from generation to generation in Karen society, as reflected by Naw Aeri, who once said that “after all, a woman’s word shall not bring changes.”

Nevertheless, women’s organizations in Thailand have been trying to increase female participation in local politics since the mid-1990s. The First Asia–Pacific Congress of Women in Politics, held in Manila in 1994, had advocated the creation of a “political pipeline” to bring women into government, and the training of potential women leaders in both gender sensitivity and political skills (CAPWIP 2000). This international drive for women’s representation coincided with domestic electoral reforms in Thailand. The passage of the Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Organization Act of 1994 was a notable step toward decentralization, creating a partly autonomous local government made up of *tambon* (sub-district) administrative organizations (TAOs) which had legal entity status, (limited) tax-raising powers, and partly (later, fully) elected assemblies. The first TAO elections in 1995 saw a disappointingly low proportion of women candidates and elected representatives. This spurred the creation that year of a Consortium of Regional Training to Promote Women’s Candidacies (Pandey 2004: 230). The program had some success in increasing women’s representation and transforming public attitudes in the 39 *tambons* where it operated (*ibid.*), but this was from a low level, and represented less than 1 percent of all the *tambons* in the country. Moreover, it did not tackle *tambons* that were mostly populated by members of “hill tribes” such as the Karen. This was partly because in places where these “hill tribes” traditionally live, a greater prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and low levels of female education posed obstacles to successful implementation. It was only in 2007 that an NGO with

---

<sup>1</sup> Figures derived from analysis of Thailand’s National Assembly website, <http://www.parliament.go.th> (accessed January 2010).

---

a longstanding program of work in such areas—the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture Association (IMPECT)—set up a similar project there linking with the Indigenous Women’s Network in Thailand, with support from the Asia Foundation. Naw Aeri was in the first batch of trainee candidates, and became one of the first trainees to be elected to a TAO assembly.

But it is unclear, in these circumstances, how effective the election of an additional woman politician may be for producing gender-sensitive governance. The mere presence of women representatives cannot override the influence of deeply ingrained biases in political and social structures. It is also widely observed in the general literature of this topic that women representatives face many barriers to full and equal participation in decision-making processes. These include: discriminatory rules and social and cultural attitudes within government institutions; an unremitted burden of household duties; and possessing in general less wealth, fewer influential political contacts, less background education, and fewer skills than men (Brody 2009: 32–34). Further difficulties appear in the particular context of a Karen village in Thailand. Not only do women there tend to experience greater local problems stemming from conservative gender attitudes and low levels of schooling for girls, along with the double burden of prejudice and discrimination in dealings with the institutions and personnel of the broader society; there is also the problem of emancipatory strategy. Karen hill people seek not only individual rights as Thai citizens, but also community rights, including substantial recognition of the legitimacy of their traditional culture and way of life, and their use of forest lands (Tomforde 2003). The strategy that they use to claim these rights—involving the argument that they have traditional wisdom in forest management—in some ways creates an artificial conservatism in their culture (Gravers 2008). This may disproportionately affect women, who are pushed further into the gender role of custodians of traditional agricultural wisdom, while compromises with modernity—involving new economic opportunities requiring increased mobility—tend to be more the business of men (Pesses 2006). More details on this are given in a later section.

Naw Aeri’s TAO was one of ten selected as site studies in a larger study on gender mainstreaming in local governance in Chiang Mai (Araya et al. 2009), which found that many women politicians did not pursue a particularly gender-sensitive agenda when elected. The article investigates that finding further.

My research began with the hypothesis that women politicians from minority ethnic groups may have to downplay the gender dimension in public policy in order to appeal to the voters and at the same time to overcome cultural barriers to entering the public political sphere. Part of the hypothesis was that such women politicians have to construct themselves both as effective in mainstream Thai society and at home in the more traditional community where they live, and that they need to show that they can project the dignity and capability of their ethnic group, win resources and information from the state, and bring this recognition and other benefits back to

their electorate. Whether or not this hypothesis was to prove correct, it was clear that the study would be concerned with understanding the factors that enabled Naw Aeri to run for office, the causes of her electoral success, the range and balance of political commitments that she undertook in the process, and the potential for these to contribute to gender-sensitive governance.

The specific research process for this paper centered on two in-depth semi-structured interviews with Naw Aeri: one six months after her election and one another four months later. Other women in her support network in the village were also interviewed, as was the coordinator of the Indigenous Women's Network in Thailand, Lahkela Chetaw.

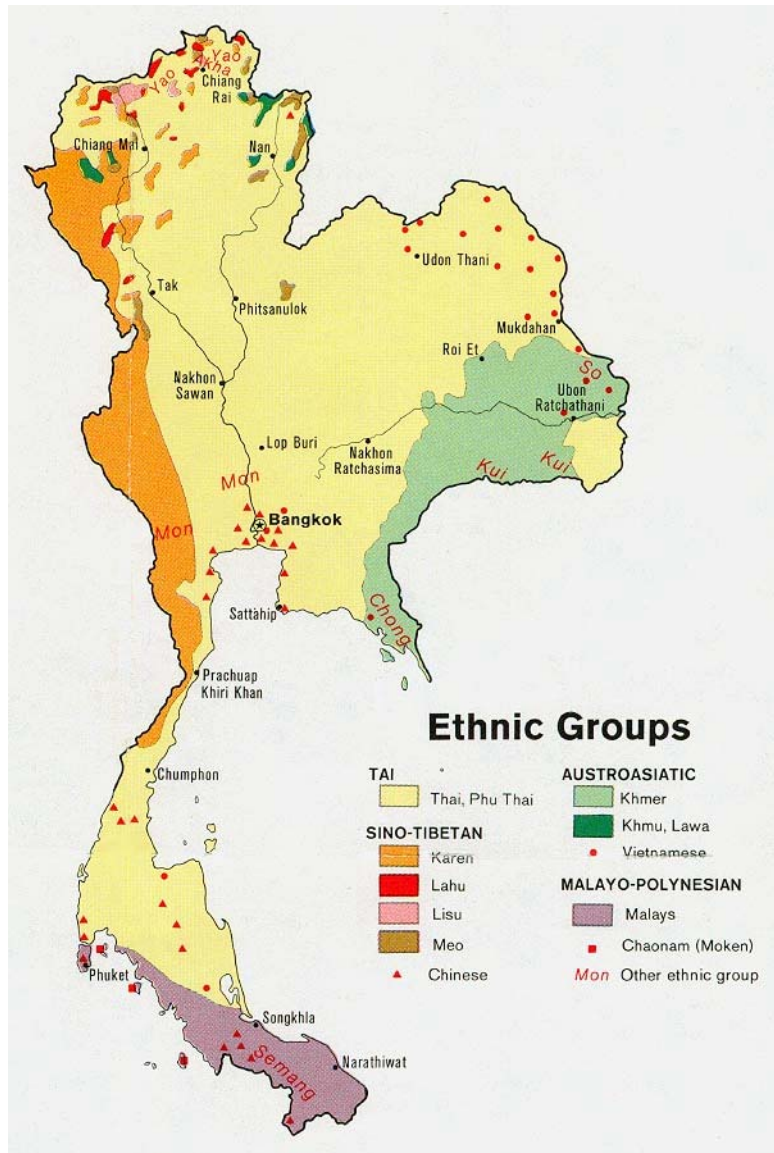
The article begins with important background information about Naw Aeri's identity as a Karen person in Thailand, and how that relates to her gender identity. It goes on to set the scene in her *tambon*, in both economic and governmental terms, and then examines the factors that led to her election. The section thereafter attempts to draw out the themes and meanings in her political strategy, centering on her interpretation of the idea of "good governance." There is then an account of how these things have played out in practice in her experience as an elected member of the TAO. The article ends with some conclusions that can reasonably be drawn from all of this.

### **Being a Karen in Thailand, and a Karen Woman**

Naw Aeri identifies herself as a Pwa Ka Nyaw person, which is to say a member of the S'kaw section of the Karen people. The Karen mostly inhabit eastern Burma/Myanmar, but several hundred thousand live across the border in western parts of Thailand's northern region where they are identified as the largest and longest-established of the "hill tribes" ("*chao khao*") (see Map 1).<sup>2</sup> This border area is characterized by mountain ranges with dense forest. Prior to the colonial times the Karen territory functioned as a frontier or buffer zone between states—Mon, Ayudhaya, Lanna, Shan, and Burma—which rose and fell in the region (Kwanchewan 2008).

---

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, the Thai Department of Social Welfare conducted a survey of highland people and found Karen to be the most populous of 13 distinct tribes. There were nearly 300,000 Karens among 1.2 million highland and ethnic people.



**Map 1: Locations of minority ethnic groups in Thailand**

Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle\\_east\\_and\\_asia/thailand\\_ethnic\\_1974.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/thailand_ethnic_1974.jpg) (accessed 9 September 2009)

The “hill tribe” designation reflects a condition of widely being seen as not fully Thai but as “the others” (“*kon eun*”) or at best falling in the middle between “the others” and Thai citizens (Chupinit 2009; Pinkaew 1995). The formal criteria for Thai citizenship among such populations have been relaxed several times since 1965, but these criteria and the gradations of status associated with them are nevertheless complex, and hill peoples’ efforts to obtain documentary certification are often obstructed by poor communications, lack of state administrative capacity, and ethnic prejudice and corruption among some officials (Toyota 2005).

The Thai state has been officially managing and interfering with the livelihood of highland ethnic populations since the 1950s, when the rise of a perceived communist threat was combined with anti-drug and pro-environmentalist discourses in a strong dynamic for tighter administration of remote areas (Toyota 2005). In 1959 the traditional mode of agriculture of the Pwa Ka Nyaw was outlawed by a prohibition on swidden or “slash and burn” (Iijima 1965: 420). This had been a popular mode of cultivation among the Karen, who argue that their procedure of clearing patches of bamboo forest, cultivating dry-rice there briefly, and allowing the bamboo to grow again is a sustainable and responsible process (Pinkaew 1991; Pesses 2006: 189–190). Initially after the prohibition some Karen villagers were allowed to cultivate uplands on a seven-field rotation system (Iijima 1965: 420) but even this allowance was reduced by further restrictions on the use of forest land in subsequent years. Since 1985, the Thai state has pursued a national forest policy that has involved expanding the forest reserve area either as national park or forest sanctuary. Consequently the relocation of highland ethnic people from the protected forest areas has intensified greatly (Pinkaew 1995). At the same time, the Thai state and other organizations have initiated development projects shifting the economy toward the production of cash crops (particularly temperate-climate vegetables) and the promotion of tourism. The Karen are thus being pushed toward sedentary cultivation of wet-rice and other crops, and from subsistence agriculture toward cash-cropping. It is often a painful transition; the trauma of relocations and changes in patterns of activity is high because it runs against the grain of strongly held cultural practices and attitudes (Iijima 1965: 420–422; Delang 2003).

Such social change poses special challenges for the women in Karen society (Pesses 2006). They, more than the men, are identified with the guardianship of traditional wisdom and the maintenance of traditional agricultural practices. When new allocations of land are received for sedentary and intensive agriculture, it tends to be the males who acquire and inherit the formal ownership of these plots, while females may retain and inherit usufruct rights to upland fields (Pesses 2006: 191–193). The reason for this appears to be a mixture of cultural attitudes; men’s greater physical capacity to open new fields; and the premium—where new technology and commerce are involved—or an ability to travel regularly to towns and cities. Interviews conducted by the present author in similar areas suggest that the fact that travel requires an official ID card, and that obtaining the card involves expensive

payments to officials, means that many families have to prioritize which of their members should get the card, and usually these are men.

### **Naw Aeri's Locality: Economic and Electoral Geography**

Huay I-khang is the village in which Naw Aeri was born. It is situated on steep, high mountains, southwest of the city of Chiang Mai. The road leads windingly for 80 kilometers over hill after hill. The village is part of the *tambon* of Mae Win, in the *ampoe* (district) of Mae Wang. Huay I-khang has been in existence for five centuries. The total number of residents is 470, most of whom are S'kaw Karen who prefer to call themselves "Pwa Ka Nyaw," meaning "humans." The *tambon* is home to approximately 22,000 people and most of the residents are also Pwa Ka Nyaw, though there are also populations of Hmong and Northern Thai (*Khon Muang*).

In line with the general trend in Karen areas, the people of Huay I-khang have been affected by the Thai state's vision of development: forest areas have been enclosed, and the economy has shifted to sedentary agriculture and tourism. The access road, although long and winding, is kept in good condition. It has enabled the extension of tourism that has been promoted from the hub of Chiang Mai, which—even in the urban area—showcases indigenous and cultural merchandise. It also serves as the main route for the transport of a variety of cold-country vegetables and fruits produced as a result of a "royal project." Such royal projects have been introduced to help poor people and shape development in many parts of Thailand. In Mae Win, as in other hilly areas, they take the form of encouraging the cultivation of produce exotic in Thailand, such as potatoes and carrots, as a cash crop, and partly as a substitute for the opium-growing that went on in many of these areas in the past. Ban Huay I-khang is also among the highland villages feeling the impact of forced relocation. About half of the area farmed around Ban Huay I-khang was declared protected forest area. Villagers who continue to till the land have often been arrested and charged for forest encroachment. They face a choice between relocation and living without land in the protected area that is their home.

Since 1996, *tambon* Mae Win has been assigned the status that gives it a TAO, and three elections have been held for its members. The last election, in 2008, saw women elected out of the total of 38 members, one of whom was Naw Aeri Thongthungluang, who represents Huay I-khang. During each of the first and second elections, one woman (each time a Northern Thai), was elected. This provided a helpful precedent for the third election in which three women were elected: two Northern Thai women and one Pwa Ka Nyaw woman.

Mae Win TAO is composed of 19 villages with 38 TAO members, two from each village. Additionally, there is a chairperson directly elected by people of the *tambon*. The population of 11 of the villages is entirely Pwa Ka Nyaw, whereas two villages are entirely Hmong and two Northern Thai. The remaining four villages have a mixture of people from the three cultures. Thus, although in the administrative area

of Mae Win people from the hill tribe cultures are the majority, they live rather separately from the Northern Thai. However, according to field reports, people of the three cultures have relationships in their daily life and in political and economic arenas. The Pwa Ka Nyaw sell labor to the Hmong and Northern Thai. Some children attend schools in which children of other ethnicities are also enrolled. In some villages, interaction and exchange of culture is not exceptional, even in religious ceremonies. Among people from the three cultures, some are Buddhist, others Christian. Politically, since they share services from the same governmental agencies—i.e. the hospital, the police station, the district office, and TAO offices—they have the chance to interact with one another. Central Thai and Northern Thai dialects are used as a major medium of communication.

In addition to the institution of the TAO there is a requirement for municipal authorities to call public meetings (*prachaccum mooban*) on major issues affecting the locality. This requirement is acclaimed by the state as providing the time and space in which local people can share their views on development plans so as to make them more responsive to their problems. But although women make up the greatest number of participants, their voices barely register. In such forums, the participating women simply feel too intimidated to speak and express their needs, let alone negotiate. Thus, the local public policy tends to take for granted local women's needs. But to declare their existence, ethnic women have to face many obstacles, including their lack of Thai fluency, a fact of which they may feel ashamed. Forums organized by CSOs (civil society organizations) have tended to be more useful. With the declaration of the national protected-area policy by the Thai state, villagers—both Hmong and Pwa Ka Nyaw—stand to suffer from forced relocation. Thus, activities to protest against the government become another avenue through which people from all ethnic denominations come together. Naw Aeri got to meet and exchange with friends from other ethnicities, both men and women, through participating in forums for common resistance. She calls this “civil political space.”

### **Naw Aeri's Resources and Electoral Support Bases**

It has often been observed in Asian contexts that women politicians who have managed to emerge in the political space have received strong support from their own family members, particularly their husbands. (Talatma 2007; Nongyao 2000; Bhinyo 1996). Naw Aeri's immediate family is perceived as being one of the more affluent in the village, a position passed down from her grandmother. According to Naw Aeri, “my grandmother possessed 30 cows and buffaloes.” Apart from amassing livestock, which could be used for work, or sold, her grandmother, the breadwinner of the family, was also a Karen woman with sophisticated thinking. She preached that all her nieces and nephews should have an equal chance to attend a state school. She pledged to sell cattle just to earn enough money to get her



grandchildren an education beyond the primary level. In fact, she was planning to have Naw Aeri enrolled in a state school, far away from the village, but was eventually forced to give in to the traditional belief held by their fellow villagers that women who venture outside the village are destined to become bad women. None of the families in the village was willing to allow its sons to marry such women. Since marrying and having a family is an ultimate honor for women, Naw Aeri's grandmother changed her mind and decided to keep Naw Aeri at home. After marrying, Naw Aeri got permission from her husband to resume her education through the non-formal education system. Thus, a few years before becoming a TAO member, Naw Aeri earned her high school degree. Her husband, a farmer who grows cold-country vegetables and fruits to feed the royal project, has supported her in all of her community activities.

Besides her family, Naw Aeri has received support from women's civil society organizations, including IMPECT and the Indigenous Women's Network in Thailand. She had been a candidate in TAO elections in 2004 but was unsuccessful, garnering in fact very few votes. However, she persevered, and when she ran again in the next election in 2009, she received the highest number of votes among three candidates competing for the two open seats in her jurisdiction. She attributes her success largely to the training she received from the Indigenous Women's Network. She attests that the information, knowledge, and inspiration she gained from the training has empowered her to keep on fighting and integrate the concept of good governance into the policy of the Mae Win TAO. The ideas she has taken from the training, and adjusted for her particular situation, are explored more fully in the next section.

Looking beyond Naw Aeri's personal support base to her voters, she identifies four main groups (or, to put it another way, she had four main types of electoral appeal): First, she could count on the votes of her kin. Second, she was helped by the reputation of her father as a previous village leader. Third, she had gained a reputation as someone who would stand up for the dignity and interests of Karen people in dealings with state officials. Fourth, she had built up a network of supporters in village groups for women, youth, and elderly people.

In terms of capitalizing on family relationships for political purposes (Naw Aeri's first and second groups), studies have shown that a number of local women politicians are descendants of reputed local politicians (Talatma 2007; Nongyao 2000). In Nongyao (2000), I pointed out that typically the political families, whose senior members may be active at the national level in Thailand, tend to plan for their female members to inherit their political influence at local level. According to the present field study, it appears that Naw Aeri Thongthungluang does not come from a strongly political family and has no connection with existing local or national elected politicians. However, her father did previously serve as the first official village head, until his automatic retirement at the age of 60. He is still revered for his

tenure, in which he was seen to be honest and hard-working. One of the roles of the village head is to facilitate the issuing of national identity cards, a task which involves a lot of time and expense in liaison with state officials in other towns. He was seen to have been effective, and not to have passed on excessive costs to villagers, as a result of which Huay I-khang became an unusual village among “hill tribe” villages for the high proportion of inhabitants who had become Thai citizens. Naw Aeri said once in an interview that she is inspired by her father and wants to become a good leader just like him. And it appears that many were willing to make the assumption that she would prove to have a similar community service ethic.

This assessment of Naw Aeri’s character has been bolstered by villagers’ perceptions of her own actions (the third group of voters that Naw Aeri mentioned as her core). She has had the courage to speak in meetings and negotiate up front with state officials who came to the village with the power of the nation-state and as law enforcement officers to expel villagers who disobey the orders about protected forest areas and who continue to farm in the disputed land. Naw Aeri intervenes as a representative of the villagers and negotiates with the officials. She shows them time after time how necessary it is for the villagers to live off the disputed land. During rounds of negotiation to resolve the conflicts, it has become obvious to many villagers that this lady in her thirties is able to take the helm of leadership and gracefully battle with state officials. Her ability to uphold dignity is important when facing officials who tend to hold prejudices against the lifestyle and people in the Pwa Ka Nyaw community. Meanwhile, the villagers observe that their male elected TAO members have not confronted the Thai state at all. According to one villager, what prompted her to choose Naw Aeri was not that they were of the same gender, but that she wanted someone from her ethnic group who was strong enough to contend with the state, which tended to use its power arbitrarily. The village had come to be so powerless, in her view, because men who were expected to perform their role by taking the lead in negotiations to solve conflicts involving the ethnic groups and within the kinship system had failed. So one of the main reasons that villagers poured in their votes for her was: “Naw Aeri is brave and is able to bargain with the officials.”

The fourth group of voters that Naw Aeri referred to could be sub-divided into three segments—women, youth, and elderly people—each characterized as sharing certain interests and a degree of group organization. Partly such interest-group formation has been long-since embodied in the culture of life in the village, but it has been accentuated by the intervention of external development actors. Encouraged by the World Bank’s advocacy of “popular participation” in the late 1970s, and by a national activist movement that had become resurgent in that decade, the Thai government from the 1980s forward has called for the formation at a village level of groupings for men, women, and youth: groupings which were used (in principle) to identify local development needs and (more concretely) to implement development projects locally (Pesses 2006: 183–184). Such groupings have also been used as a

foundation for development assistance by religious and other non-governmental organizations (ibid.). Naw Aeri has long been active not only in the women's group but, making use of the contacts she gained there with other development actors, in networking with groups of youth and elderly people. In this way she made it part of her electoral business to familiarize herself with their priorities for projects to be resourced from outside. She believes that her electoral success is partly due to some villagers having strong faith and confidence in the potential of village development spearheaded by networks of women, children, youth, and older persons, and in her ability to realize that potential. Male community leaders in the past have been unable to funnel a budget from the Mae Win TAO to support development projects in their own respective villages, particularly regarding initiatives that promote women's and children's quality of life.

### **Naw Aeri's Strategy of Good Governance**

Through the training that she received from 2008 to 2009, Naw Aeri has developed her political thinking around the concept of "thammarat," which may be translated as "good governance." Although the idea of good governance had become popular with international aid institutions and donor governments rapidly by the end of the Cold War in order to shape processes of liberalization, it only entered political discourse in Thailand at the time of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (Orlandini 2003: 18, 23; Nongyao 2004). In Asia it has been the subject of a variety of translations and competing interpretations (ibid.). At the same time, "governance" has become an important term for feminists in thinking about gender in the public sphere (Baden 2000; Nongyao 2004; Brody 2009). The recent training received by Naw Aeri is referred to by its donor, the Asia Foundation, as the Civic Participation in Local Governance (CPLG) project. It is doubtless that this training partly reflects the particular agendas of the back-donor, the U.S. Department of State, but the training also builds on previous work around the idea of good governance by women's organizations and state agencies in Thailand, including the Department of Local Administration, the Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development, UNIFEM-Thailand, the Gender and Development Research Institute, and the Women and Constitution Network. Based on the assumptions of liberal democracy, the efforts are geared toward making possible the achievement of rights and equality and tackling the gender imbalance caused by the long-standing male dominance in representative politics at all levels. These efforts have contributed to notions concerning gender rights and equality enshrined in the 1997 and 2007 Thai constitutions, pursuing the notion that women are a distinct social category. At village and *tambon* levels, the task for feminist activists is seen as one of creating political space for women. Principally, good governance, in the gender perspective that Naw Aeri has learned about during the training, is about creating identities and spaces for women as agents. It aims to make them leaders in decision-making, to make their voices heard, and to enable them to bring about positive changes in the

lives of women. This set of goals goes against the attitude prevalent in Pwa Ka Nyaw culture (in common with other cultures, including those of central and northern Thailand), which attributes little value to and holds little expectation for the existence of women in the public arena.

But the focus is not only on women as a distinct interest group. The concept of good governance helps to link this concern with the needs of other groups in the locality, who are also seen as marginalized. Naw Aeri understands that this includes children, youth, and older persons. Many villagers have the impression that local politics are a matter concerning the development of infrastructure: obtaining resources for roads, buildings, water supplies, and so on. Issues like a lack of employment among women, older persons, and youth; a lack of budget for day-care centers; domestic violence; illiteracy; and ethnic biases are considered rather individual problems warranting much less importance. Because they are seen as part of the private sphere they are the special concern of women. Naw Aeri's political agenda brings these issues into the public sphere. During her period as an activist, and in preparation for her electoral bid, she has therefore advocated community development activities to emphasize creating opportunities for education and leadership among Pwa Ka Nyaw children and youth of both genders. In consultation with groups of potential beneficiaries she has developed concrete proposals such as vocational training for housewives and older persons, provision of health check-ups, day-care centers, and youth projects for forest, earth, and water conservation.

Concern for the marginalized also extends to the problem of being an ethnic minority. Naw Aeri's most ambitious and controversial project commitment is to the development and application of a local curriculum in schools. The 1999 National Education Act provides for schools to adapt up to 30 percent of their curriculum to accommodate local cultures. But in reality, most of the ethnic communities in *tambon* Mae Win and elsewhere have not had the chance to utilize the local curriculum to reproduce and engender their own local knowledge and wisdom very much.

The endeavor to revive local cultures and wisdom is a political tool used by the Pwa Ka Nyaw and other cultural groups to fight against assimilation efforts perpetuated by the Thai state in previous decades. The Thai state has been criticized for creating national identity by relocating and diminishing the cultural space of ethnic groups through imposing school curricula and installing teachers who are mostly from lowland ethnic groups. CSOs have therefore begun to raise more questions about the kind of education provided by the state.

A case in point is the work by Prasit Leepreecha and Aphai Wanichpradit (2009) on the "local wisdom of the Hmong community at Mae Sar Mai Village." An ethnic scholar, Prasit is ethnically Hmong and, with Aphai, he acknowledges that the kind of education arranged by the Thai state for highland ethnic people since World War II has contributed positively in many ways to the highland communities, for instance

by helping to increase literacy and to communicate with state officials, and therefore to adapt themselves to a better quality of life; by broadening their worldviews and thinking; by making them feel part of the same society as the lowlanders; and by fostering patriotism among the ethnic people. But on the other hand, the school system has had grave impacts on ethnic cultures, causing the villagers to lose their livelihoods and time-honored local wisdom. Youth who have gone through the school system feel less confident in their ethnic identities when living in a big city. In this sense, youngsters are the constructed “others,” who, in turn, construct their own “other.” So local curricula can be supported as an attempt to reconstruct youth with multiple identities—both hill-tribe and ethnic Thai—who would have a sense of belonging both in the city and in ethnic villages.

The contents of the local curriculum that Naw Aeri supports include the history, languages, and cultures of ethnic groups, and their wisdom in regards to forest conservation. The idea is that all the issues will be integrated into the school curriculum used in the village. In other villages of the *tambon*, Pwa Ka Nyaw and other ethnic minority people are often found to oppose this initiative, believing it will simply waste their children’s time. But in Huay I-khang, Naw Aeri believes she has won people’s support for the idea, including the telling of stories by and about ethnic people. Villagers thus get the chance to share their experiences and pass on their wisdom to the next generation. Apart from helping to revive contemporary memories of the ethnic group, the local curriculum also helps to develop the politics of identity as well, an endeavor that, it is hoped, will strengthen their claim to continue to live in, and make use of, forest lands.

### **Problems and Responses in Naw Aeri’s Experience of Local Democracy**

After six months as an elected representative, this political space failed to satisfy Naw Aeri, prompting her to conclude that “local politics are neither a space for change-making nor any hope.” But in the subsequent four months, she became more familiar with the representative politics in Mae Win and developed an analysis, which, though disillusioned, may help her to progress. She explained:

The entire decision-making power is subject to the sole discretion of *Por* [meaning the permanent secretary of Mae Win TAO]. The meeting is called just for a ceremonial purpose. There simply is no accountability. All the documents are prepared at the command of the *Por* who claims to have complied with relevant rules and regulations. And no one in the TAO council dares to raise any question against *Por*.

Naw Aeri has not been able to integrate her agenda into the 2009 fiscal year plan dictated by the TAO permanent secretary. According to her account, the TAO permanent secretary has set out plans to make Mae Win a tourist spot for eco-cultural tourism, and thus a lot of money has been put into tourism-development projects. A budget for an income-generation project has been devoted to the

development of accommodation to serve the needs of home-stay tourists. But Naw Aeri insists the tourist projects have been opposed by women's groups in Ban Huay I-khang as unfit for the village. In her view the budget should be used for income-generation schemes such as the ones she proposes, adapted to suit older persons and women.

TAO assembly meetings are monthly. One of the main obstacles identified by Naw Aeri in carrying out her role in the TAO is the fact that she and her fellow ethnic-minority representatives tend to be scared to express themselves in the meeting fearing that they "are not able to speak the language clearly; they feel they have to speak slowly and lack the knowledge of rules and regulations." They are also afraid of the power of the *Por*, a very knowledgeable governmental official. The rules and regulations set forth by the central administration have thus become a kind of technology monopolized by the TAO permanent secretary.

After another few months, with her hard-won understanding of organizational culture and knowing who is in charge, Naw Aeri was able to act as an agent to steer the course of implementation toward democracy and cultural negotiation between state and people. She starts by creating a rapport with the TAO permanent secretary, approaching him more often to seek advice on various projects. Her approach is based on humility, just like someone younger approaching someone more senior, reflecting the asymmetric relation between the state and the people.

I told *Por*: 'The projects to improve the day-care center, provide vocational training for older persons, and raise environmental awareness among youth are the things I promised to local people during my election campaign and I need to find money to make them happen. (...) And you told me yourself that whatever the people need, you can deliver.'

Eventually, the permanent secretary gave her his word that she would get the money for the projects in the next fiscal year. But in 2009, the TAO could only support a local curriculum project and efforts to instill environmental awareness among youth.

Naw Aeri had a little more early success with her promotion of the local curriculum project. Following negotiations with the TAO permanent secretary she won a small allocation for it. She does not feel too disheartened by the meager resources since, in her view, support from the local administration cannot be gauged exclusively from its monetary value. The main value is in fact the legitimization given to new development initiatives. The fact that the local curriculum project has been accepted by a local administration body shows that local knowledge and wisdom have started to gain acceptance and have been recognized as a political agenda and local development strategy.

Apart from the local curriculum project, Naw Aeri and her ethnic colleagues also negotiated to have their ethnic identities emerge as part of the TAO culture. She proposed that wearing traditional dress be allowed during the monthly meeting, rather than the government uniforms issued to members. She explains that being

clad in official uniforms or according to a universal dress code like the lowlanders makes her feel less confident in herself and less able to express herself. The indigenous dress-code policies do not just change the image of the TAO—symbolically and psychologically bringing its members closer to the local electorate—but also help to increase the self-respect of the ethnic TAO members. The language of the meetings remains Central Thai, however.

Naw Aeri's position as an elected representative is also significant in reinforcing her position as an activist and an opinion leader. As part of the Indigenous Women Network in Thailand she has been working with the Women's Study Centre at Chiang Mai University to carry out studies promoting learning groups and reproductive health awareness among ethnic women. The efforts are geared toward encouraging local women to have cervical cancer screening. Despite its being a governmental project, very few ethnic women have shown interest in the service. In addition, she hopes that findings from the research will be used to encourage local health officials to be more sensitive toward gender issues.

## Conclusion

The initial hypothesis of the study—that an aspiring woman politician in Naw Aeri's position would need to construct her public identity as man-like—was partly confirmed. A key part of her electoral appeal was her perceived "bravery" in confronting state officials who attempted to stop villagers from using forest land.

But although bravery in that role was seen as a stereotypically masculine quality, her style in the task included the important Thai feminine trait of "gracefulness." Moreover, another part of her distinctive platform—a commitment to projects focused on marginalized age and gender groups within the village, emphasizing human development rather than physical infrastructure—was a consciously feminine approach. Whether or not they were electorally effective, such projects were her main preoccupation in the TAO. Yet the emancipatory effects of these projects may be mixed. While the local curriculum will doubtless help Pwa Ka Nyaw villagers hold onto their distinct identity, there is a danger that this will feed into the state's development strategy of promoting tourism and a conservative vision of gender roles, more than it helps in the lowlanders' assertions of traditional usufruct land rights.

Naw Aeri has so far had only limited success in securing resources for these projects. The TAO assembly could be seen as merely a new instrument of state clientelism dressed in democratic clothing. The permanent secretary has allowed her some small successes to report to her voters, and in order to win these she has felt obliged to use a stereotypically feminine, supplicant posture. It would seem that the democratic effectiveness of the TAO assembly must depend largely on the ability of its members to become knowledgeable in procedural matters, and to form coalitions of interest among themselves, so as not to be the object of divide-and-conquer





- 
- Talatma Choonpetch (2007) (ตาลัศมา จุลเพชร (2550)). 'Roles of women in local leadership: case study of the chairperson of a Tambon Administration (TAO)' (บทบาทผู้นำสตรีในการปกครองท้องถิ่น: กรณีศึกษานายกองค์การบริหารส่วนตำบล), presented at the Eighth Symposium on Women's Studies: 'The Political Economy of Gender', 16-18 August 2007, organized by the Women and Youth Study Program, Thammasat University, Bangkok
- Tomforde, M. (2003) 'The global in the local: Contested resource-use systems of the Karen and Hmong in northern Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34:347-360
- Toyota, M. (2005) 'Subjects of the nation without citizenship: The case of 'hill tribes' in Thailand' in W. Kymlicka and H. Baogang (eds.) *Multiculturalism in Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press
- UNIFEM (2008) 'Who answers to women? Gender and accountability: Progress of the world's women 2008/2009'. Online. Available [http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/media/POWW08\\_Report\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/media/POWW08_Report_Full_Text.pdf) (accessed 31<sup>st</sup> January 2010)
- UNIFEM (undated) 'Democratic governance'. Online. Available [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/democratic\\_governance/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/democratic_governance/) (accessed 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010)