

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

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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.

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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