

## CHAPTER FIVE

# *A Glimpse of Women Leaders in Thai Local Politics*

JUREE VICHIT-VADAKAN

### INTRODUCTION

**T**he matter of women in local politics in Thailand is not a well-researched area of politics. Although there are a few studies on this topic, more than half of these are MA and PhD dissertations (Boonsong 1998; Marpaneet 2003; Noppabhadol 2001; Piyaporn 1999; Prateep 1985; Rawiwan 1997; Sasiporn 1996; Smira 1986; Supaporn 1993; Suthinee 2002; Voralux 1995; Yoawalux 1997). Not a single study can, however, be cited as an authoritative study. Women candidates were allowed to enter local politics only 25 years ago and the topic is therefore relatively new compared with national politics, where women were allowed to stand for election more than 70 years ago. As a matter of fact, women in national politics is also an area in need of further research and study.

This paper will provide a glimpse into women's participation in local politics in Thailand. The paper will use profiles of women leaders at the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO), which is the lowest level of the administrative system in Thailand, where leaders are elected by the local citizens. By looking at some of these leaders, one can shed light on whether or not women's role and participation

in local politics can be understood and analyzed. Each Tambon covers a certain number of villages. Tambons vary in size and budget allocation, and are grouped into different tiers. Larger and wealthier tambons may eventually be classified as a municipality. The current classification system is not precise, which casts questions on the usefulness of the classification system at all.

At the lowest level, the traditional system of village heads remains. This local leadership structure has been in place for a long time. The Ministry of Interior was and continues to be in charge of local administration. The village heads and sub-district heads are accountable to the Ministry of Interior via the assistant sub-district officers and the district officer. As village and sub-district heads they are also responsible for their constituents' immediate needs, hence village heads and sub-district heads play dual roles, having to balance between promoting local villagers' needs and demands and having to follow the orders and dictates of their superiors from the Ministry of Interior.

When examining the studies on this topic, there is a somewhat limited range of issues surveyed and questions asked. For example, one common theme studied involves the perception or views people have of local women politicians. This theme should focus on what factors contribute to the acceptance of women leaders, for example their personal attributes, performance, or capability (see Noppabhadol 2001; Pornpen 2005; Piyaporn 1999; Prateep 1985; Rawiwan 1997; Smira 1986; Supaporn 1993; Voralux 1995). The second theme deals with the factors which promote or deter women from entering local politics, asking what factors are enabling factors, and why some women take the plunge into politics (see Boonsong 1998; Noppabhadol 2001; Smira 1986; Suthinee 2002). The third theme regards the leadership and performance of women politicians at different levels within the local government context (see Prateep 1985; Suthinee 2002).

While the findings of these studies are interesting, they are not altogether unexpected. There is a lack of ingenuity or creativity in exploring new dimensions. The exception would be the latest study by Pornpen (2005), which is titled *A Study of Direct Stakeholders'*

*Opinions toward Women's Local Government Participation in Thailand.* The title is somewhat misleading as it sounds like yet another opinion survey on women politicians, but in reality it is an interesting study using qualitative research methods in interviews that elicit stakeholders' opinions about women's political participation in four TAOs from different regions in Thailand. This study provides some depth on the factors affecting women's opportunities to win elections or to become a TAO member. Barriers or obstacles that women candidates face are also identified in this study, which shows that differences in physical, socio-cultural, economic factors affect the expectations and needs of women politicians. In other words, women politicians' personal attributes, their ability or capability, and their performance vary according to the level of socio-economic development and the urban or rural nature of the TAOs. Hence, intervention strategies to promote women's participation in politics also need to vary to make them suitable to the segmented contexts. New possibilities emerge, enabled by this study, for improved future studies and for a better understanding of this topic. It also paves the way for a more innovative approach towards intervention to increase the number of women in local politics. Government organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to increase the number of women in decision-making positions operate according to conventional standards and they may not have designed their programs, projects and intervention strategies with enough consideration of the differences found between people in society. This study points to the need for diverse strategies and programs as well as for more careful targeting of the women to be promoted through study and analysis of the socio-cultural, economic and physical environment of the areas in which promotion and intervention are to take place.

#### *The Collected Data*

The data used in this paper comes from two sources. The first source consists of secondary data collected from written materials such as MA and PhD dissertations, journal articles, newspapers, websites

and other printed materials. These materials were mostly written in Thai.

The second source consists of primary data based on personal interviews and opinions expressed in workshops collected over several years. Data on life histories or profiles of some women political leaders in local government come from personal conversations collected over many years. Primary and secondary data were used in combination.

I have also summarized, extracted and sorted out the major points and salient issues from previous studies by using my own interpretation and analysis of the data. In the many workshops, seminars, conferences and training sessions held on women's issues over the past two decades, many of the ideas and findings here may have been expressed, analyzed, proposed, transmitted and reproduced in one form or another at one time or another. In fact, some opinions expressed by women leaders reflect the degree to which they have been made conscious about gender equality and mainstream gender concepts.

*A Summary of the Existing Literature on Women in Local Politics*

I have organized and grouped the themes discussed below for analytical purposes. In the original studies, the categorical distinctions may not be as clear-cut and some of the themes overlap or are not mutually exclusive. Suffice to say that the analysis of these studies is based on my understanding, interpretation and analysis of these studies.

The earliest study of the views of individuals and groups on women in local government was conducted only a few years after women were first allowed to take part in elections for village heads and Tambon heads (Prateep 1985). In this and a subsequent study, the focus was on how well women performed as local leaders. Although the men were initially reluctant to accept women as local leaders, there were signs that women leaders' positive role and performance will lead to acceptance. Generally, there is a stereotypical perception of women leaders as flexible, good coordinators, having the ability to persuade and convince others through gentle, unthreat-

ening language and behaviour. These attributes may indicate women leaders' position *vis-à-vis* others in a horizontal relationship and not a vertical power relationship. Soliciting support, cooperation, and collaboration seem to be what women leaders do routinely, which probably make them appear as less of a threat in their approach (Rawiwan 1997). In fact, it is likely that the reason women leaders operate horizontally with their peers – on equal terms – rather than exercising power in their relationship is that the villagers perceive women's request for contributions of both cash and labour as a negative aspect of women's leadership (Smira 1986; Rawiwan 1997).

In a society where citizens have been taught to wait for state agencies' support and assistance in a top-down manner, it is understandably difficult for many villagers to adjust to the notion of self-help by participating in problem-solving strategies. Populist policies and promises from politicians before elections tend to perpetuate a culture of dependency and individual inefficacy, hence when women leaders urge villagers to contribute money or labour for the common good, villages are generally either unprepared or unwilling to do so.

A common question asked, often to women leaders themselves, is whether women politicians are accepted, which suggests that it is an interesting subject to many people. This issue will be addressed in the profile of women leaders given later in this chapter. The question at hand is a question women leaders are aware of and part of their work is to build acceptance among their male colleagues and in society more generally, including government agencies and institutions. Male chauvinism, societal values and prejudice prevent the acceptance of women as leaders (Surasawadee 2003).

Women leaders recognize some of their own limitations, such as their lack of training and their limited experience of speaking in public (Voralux 1995). Self-confidence, being news-oriented and well-informed on public issues, having some knowledge and understanding of the law, especially bureaucratic rules, regulations and procedures become quite crucial for women leaders' success and performance.

Women leaders can be divided into different categories. Women leaders' personal attributes and personal capability can be distin-

guished when they are good at what they do. A more problematic dimension involves women leaders' performance, especially the results of their performance. Many admit that even though women leaders are well coordinated, well-mannered, sincere and hard working the acceptance of women's performance results is still low (Boonsong 1998; Piyaporn 1999; Rawiwan 1997; Smira 1986,; Supaporn 1993; Suthinee 2002).

In one study, the researcher claimed that educated men accepted and appreciated women's role in politics more than uneducated men and that younger men also accepted women's role in politics more than older men (Piyaporn 1999). If this trend continues, there is reason to be optimistic that the acceptance of women as leaders will continue to grow since education levels are increasing in Thailand.

THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN'S ENTRY AND  
SUCCESS IN LOCAL POLITICS

Not surprisingly, women's entry into politics tends to be based on age, experience, family and even kin support as well as being well-prepared to confront challenges. Family duties and obligations such as taking care of young children deter women from getting involved in politics. Their life partner, their children and the extended family need to be supportive or at least agreeable to women's involvement in politics. Women with little money or in financial trouble will not stand as the logical choice or as a strong candidate. Women with no previous track record in civic engagement have not proven themselves as a leader and will not be given the public endorsement and approval that is needed. Experience is highly valued, especially for women, breaking into a male dominated field.

Although wealth is not absolutely necessary for engagement in local politics, none of the studies have attested to the fact that anyone without money can compete successfully. In fact, in this study I have observed that the higher the level of politics, the more resources are needed. The monthly income of women elected as village and sub-district heads and TAO members seem to be around Bht10,000-15,000 monthly. The remuneration for positions as village head, sub-district

head and elected TAO chair or council members is insignificant (not exceeding at most a couple of thousand baht per month), so a woman leader's monthly income must come from other sources. It is interesting that while local politicians are expected to perform their tasks well, they have to serve on a partially *pro-bono* basis. All three women who serve as mayors at the municipal and city levels in this study are financially comfortable and have considerable resources, as will be shown in their life histories later on in this paper.

For women to be successful in local politics, the following conditions must be present:

- ✦ Public speaking skills and self-confidence. It is interesting to note here that when women leaders at the TAOs are being ignored and undermined by their male colleagues, many admit to a loss of confidence.
- ✦ Support from family, kin group, local leaders or political party.
- ✦ Having initiated programs or projects that succeeded.
- ✦ Good relationships with external agencies and persons, where they can recruit external assistance to further local causes.
- ✦ Being informed, especially having access to information from the outside world, which can help them make good decisions on the local level.

*Problems and Obstacles Faced by Women Who Aspire to Enter Politics*  
Aside from problems like male chauvinism, socio-cultural values of male supremacy and male dominance in the public sphere, women leaders also face the following problems:

- ✦ Laws, regulations, procedures which are difficult and unnecessarily opaque and hard to understand, especially for those not well educated or familiar with bureaucratic culture and systems. In fact, men in local politics have the same problem.
- ✦ No real understanding of their roles and responsibilities, including the realm of possible actions and rights that they can exercise.

- ✦ Uneasy and uncomfortable relationships between many elected leaders and with the permanent bureaucratic staff members.
- ✦ Divisiveness and conflict in many TAOs, which create tensions for all in the TAO.
- ✦ Negative feelings towards their male colleagues, especially with regards to men's drinking habits, unethical behaviour or lack of commitment.
- ✦ Local constituents' lack an understanding for elected women politicians' effort, resulting in their efforts being unappreciated.
- ✦ Uneasiness with the procurement system where men dominate and where corrupt behaviour often occurs.
- ✦ Negative feelings toward the permanent officials who are seen by some elected women leaders as incompetent, tardy and uncommitted to public service and the notion of public good.

There has only been one PhD dissertation on the issue of whether or not local level women politicians bring different values to the realm of politics and whether or not they have made a difference in the administration. Marpraneet's dissertation (2003) titled 'Gender Differences in Representation of Sub-district Administration Organization (SAO) Members in Kalasin Province' tested a set of hypotheses but was unable to prove that women leaders helped to advance women's issues and agendas. From this dissertation, one can conclude that there was no significant difference between men's and women's role in local government. The women politicians did not understand why it was important to focus on women's interests or needs. It was as if gender was a non-issue and female leaders did not need to act or behave differently from male politicians. On that basis, women leaders studied in that thesis did not do things differently from the male politicians.

It is interesting that the other studies that I looked at in the course of writing this chapter have come up with different findings. Observations by women politicians at the local level point to the differences between male and female politicians' interests and em-



phases, as expressed in the long and short profiles of women leaders to be presented later in this chapter.

#### WOMEN LEADERS AT THE TAOs

Let us begin at the consideration of women in politics at the local level by looking at the profiles of women leaders at the sub-district levels. There are currently two parallel leadership systems at the sub-district level. The first one is the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO), which has a council and an executive committee whose members are all elected by villagers from the villages that comprise the sub-district or Tambon. The TAO is the lowest level of the administrative unit, where the budget is allocated and decisions are made. The TAO is designed to serve as a level of government where important local decisions can be made. Citizens' participation at this level was perceived to be critical to the democratic process. As the sub-district is close to home, villagers can exert their rights and demands, which creates a responsive local government sensitive to their needs. Members of both the TAO executive committee and the TAO council are elected by members of the sub-district.

The second system is the traditional system of sub-district head and village head. These two positions are accountable to the district officer and the sub-district officers from the Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior. In the past, these two positions were given long-term tenure and were restricted to men, with women seen as unsuitable or inappropriate for these positions. The laws changed 25 years ago in 1982, and women were allowed to contest for these two positions. Some women have been successful and some of them have become outstanding village heads and sub-district heads. By and large, these positions are still male-dominated (see Table 5.1).

When the TAO came into existence, it was the result of an intention to decentralize the administrative system of Thailand, to devolve authority and decision-making, including budget allocations for local projects that are suitable to local needs and requirements. Theoretically, therefore, the elected TAO Administrative structure

Table 5.1: Women elected to local, municipal and provincial administrations, 2004

	<i>Total number</i>	<i>% Women</i>
Provincial Council members	2,322	4.8
Municipality Council members	10,167	6.6
Sub-district heads	7,263	2.4
Village heads	61,344	3.3
Sub-district Administrative Organization		
• Board chairpersons	6,725	3.8
• members	127,594	6.7

Source: GDRI 2005, cited in UNDP 2006.

was to become the leading structure at the local level, however the village head and sub-district head system continue to exist, showing no likelihood of disappearing, and the same is the case for district and sub-district officers. Although the TAO system is under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, it is also supervised by another department, which promotes local administration.

The leaders in both agencies are elected and have fixed terms. In theory, the TAO system is the new system which is in congruence with the democratic system while the village head and sub-district head system is only a supportive system for the district officer. Even today, however, the district officer assumes great power and authority via his role as the representative for the Ministry of Interior, hence the parallel structure may in fact delay the growth and maturity of the TAO system. While it is true that many (if not most) of the TAO elected leaders fall short with regards to the expectations on them as capable local leaders with moral integrity, they have not had the benefit of full support, full development or enough autonomy to learn and mature on their own. The tedious and burdensome rules and regulations imposed on every sphere of their activity are difficult even for the more well-educated and sophisticated politicians, let alone for rural level leaders who often are not well-versed in bureaucratic norms and culture. The local government officials who comprise the regular staff of the TAOs are subsumed under

the oversight of the Ministry of Interior. Consequently, there is often imbalance within the TAO as either the elected TAO superiors over-exert their authority to the detriment of the TAO staff, or as in many cases, the TAO administrative staff, particularly the head of staff, misuse their great power and authority because of secure tenure as permanent government officials and because of familiarity with the laws and regulations, including the administrative procedures and processes. This imbalance of power between the elected leaders and the TAO officials and staff members often leads to tension and conflict. Even when there is collaboration, cooperation or perhaps collusion between the two parties, this may not benefit the local inhabitants, as in the case that the parties share the resources between them at the expense of the local citizens.

There has been a strong tendency for the TAOs to focus attention and funds on physical infrastructure projects. TAOs are notorious for building, repairing and rebuilding roads while giving less money, interest and understanding to social development and improvements in quality of life. Many TAOs, however, have begun to change and have become interested in social development.

The educated, urban public has been critical of the TAOs' performance. Fuelled by reports of incidents of corruption, conflicts and ruthless competition among TAO power holders and power aspirants that sometime erupt into violence, TAOs as an institution have not been kindly regarded by city dwellers and the central government.

In the context described above, we find some women who dare to venture into the political arena of the TAO. Some have also opted for leadership roles via the traditional roles of village heads or heads of sub-district.

#### *Profiles of Women Leaders at the Sub-district Level*

Malichien Pengvong was the first woman to attain the position of a sub-district head (Eujit, *Journal of Sub-district and Village Heads* 1994). Malichien's late father had been a sub-district head, and after women were allowed to compete for the position of village head

and sub-district head, Malichien decided to compete for the position of village head herself. It was not an easy decision as villagers were not used to the idea of having a woman as head of the village. It was like going up against centuries of tradition and practice, according to Malichien. She was, however, not deterred because she was accustomed to difficulties. Her parents died while she was still in school. As the eldest child, she decided to work to support her younger siblings and keep them in school. She was determined to be self-reliant, and adhering to the principle of frugality served her well. When she became more self-sufficient, she threw herself into community work by contributing to public activities, which her late father had inspired her to do.

After she had become the village head, the position of sub-district head became available, and Malichien decided to stand for election. Back then, it was a novel thing for women to become a sub-district head or *Kamnan*. Her strong leadership as a village head was well-known in the sub-district by then and fellow villagers knew that she was sincerely interested in their welfare. Consequently, she was elected as the first sub-district head in Thailand.

By working hard, (she professed to have worked twice as hard as men), immersing herself in the villagers' lives, and conscientiously and effectively linking the sub-district to the world outside via the bureaucratic channels and resources, Malichien gained the trust and respect of the villagers as well as her supervisors at the Ministry of Interior. Malichien's initiative and effort in organizing income-generating opportunities and activities for the villagers and her effort to seek additional water sources for the people did not go unnoticed by those concerned. Consequently, her village and her sub-district, which are in a very poor district in one of the poorest provinces of Thailand, gained recognition and received various awards for being an outstanding village and sub-district.

In 1994 Malichien became the first woman to receive the outstanding head of the sub-district award by the Ministry of Interior, which was quite an achievement considering that she was competing against over 7,000 other sub-district heads. It was even more difficult

because she had to compete against so many men in a traditionally male domain. Malichien believed that the trust, respect and faith that the villagers in her sub-district had in her were crucial to her success. While Malichien was 'hands-on' in her dealings with different problems, she was also diligent and personable. She was close to the villagers and empathized with their problems, and as a result she was able to help improve the living conditions in a very poor sub-district. In particular, she was able to mobilize external resources to achieve access to water for everyone in the sub-district.

Eaujit Towtomma received the outstanding village head award from the Ministry of Interior in 1994, the same year that Malichien received the reward for outstanding head of the sub-district award (*Journal of Sub-district and Village*: 1994).

Eaujit's father died when she was four years old. She had a rough time in her early life, having to work hard carrying rice in rice mills to support her younger siblings. Eventually she learned to sew and made a living from it, and then when she was 21 years old, she married a man who was a civil engineer and they had a son. She started to help out in the village and was well-liked by her fellow villagers. Her husband and her fellow villagers urged her to run for election as the head of the village. After she was elected she started some new projects by organizing a system of village guards to protect the village. They were given armbands to show that they were on duty. She also coordinated with external authorities to facilitate budget allocations for water and other services, and she organized income-generating groups and a basket weaving group to add to their financial base.

Eaujit remained conscientious in her role as the village head even after her husband passed away four years before she received her award. In her opinion, she had been successful because her intentions towards her fellow villagers had been sincere and because she had used her sweet, gentle and persuasive verbal skills and was thereby able to win the villagers' confidence.

Malichien and Eaujit were active before the TAO was established. These two women were elected and have served as liaisons between the village and the sub-district as well as with the bureaucrats and gov-

ernment agencies outside the village context. Their ability to represent village needs and requirements to the external world was important. Villagers appreciated leaders who could mobilize resources from the outside world. Management skills were not crucial then as the village and the sub-district were not self-governed in those days.

As time and the political environment changed and the TAO came into existence, a different set of skills became important. Let us examine some of the more contemporary TAO elected women leaders to see if their roles, personal attributes and capabilities are similar to, or different from, the women village heads and sub-district heads that have been profiled.

As the Chairperson of the TAO Sirinporn faced the challenge of putting less efforts into her own business because she needed to devote herself to the TAO (*Matichon* 25 September 2000: 24). Her relatives were entrusted with the care of her business. Sirinporn firmly believed that TAO success had to be built on 'love and unity' among the inhabitants of the different villages in the TAO. In order to move forward, it was important to foster a shared goal for development, with education as the focal point, therefore resources were allocated to the four schools and one child care centre in this sub-district. She also paid attention to other social development activities like a savings groups as a viable local financial institution, strengthening women's groups, and the elderly. These achievements were possible because of her ability to negotiate with a lot of people. She employed 'gentleness', 'sweet words', sincerity, integrity and self-sacrifice to make things happen. Sirinporn also talked about the need to have a mentor or a coach in dealing with the regulations and administrative procedures involved in the work she did for the TAO.

There are more brief profiles of local level women politicians that I will describe to provide a personal portrayal of them as human beings and politicians whose experiences may shed light on our understanding and analysis of women politicians in local politics.

Thongdee Pohyong served as a member of the TAO (Surasawadee 2003). Prior to her election, she was active in community affairs. Her claim to fame in the village was her part in bringing electricity to her

village. Thongdee was thrilled, when through an intermediary, she learned from the Provincial Electricity Authority official that it was possible to set up electricity infrastructure in her village if only her village was willing to assume a portion of the costs. She convinced her villagers to contribute to the cost of the project. Most villagers agreed to the plan and gave it their financial support. Her part in this project inspired widespread acceptance and respect among her fellow villagers. She became an informal leader even before having been elected to a formal leadership position.

In fact, she became more involved in village development activities after her husband, who was a teacher, passed away. Thongdee herself was an entrepreneur, running a beauty shop and other businesses ventures. As a local leader, her home became the meeting place for political canvassers and political campaigns. By listening to the discussions during these gatherings, Thongdee began to learn about politics, gaining informal training or experience by osmosis. Her children had grown up by then, relieving her of household chores and responsibilities, which enabled her to engage in the TAO and other public activities.

Thongdee wanted to pursue other infrastructure projects such as building better roads and bringing in a tap-water system. Perhaps she was inspired by her earlier success in bringing electricity to her village. When she decided to contest in the election, Thongdee was up against three male candidates. She decided against buying votes. Nonetheless, after she won, she had to throw a big feast to celebrate as a form of paying tributes to the villagers who elected her, at a cost of 27,000 baht

Thongdee's role in giving advice, soliciting assistance for local projects and mobilizing resources from the outside to help match the local budget brought her praise and respect. When asked if she would like to see more women in local politics, Thongdee was most enthusiastic. In her experience women are reasonable, cooperate and collaborate well and tend to fulfil their promises.

Preeyawat Chaovieng moved to the Udon Thani Province where she made a living as a seamstress (Surawadee 2003). Whatever money

she made, she tried to save and was successful in converting her assets into a house. Her husband, an electrician, had to travel around where his skills were required and where he could find work. Consequently, she was responsible for raising her five children, including a pair of twins, almost by herself. In her efforts to secure her children's future she made great sacrifices to invest in their education and did not hesitate to take out loans to put her children through higher education. While she had only seven years of education herself, she was determined to do the best for her children's education.

Preeyawat was of a different faith from most other TAO women leaders. She is a Catholic and her faith and religious teachings have guided her, especially in her political and social activities. As Catholicism preaches charitable acts and sacrifices, Preeyawat believed that these principles had motivated her to engage in public activities, even before assuming an official position. She seized every opportunity to gather resources to the local area. Preeyawat was instrumental in writing a proposal for projects to get support from the Social Investment Fund. She never turned away from opportunities for self-improvement, taking up opportunities to study children's rights, women's rights and Buddhism. She stood up against injustices that occurred in her village. In her work, she fought to penalize a teacher who slapped students with a shoe. Preeyawat fought to have child labourers properly registered and treated. When the locals needed training and advice, she used her contacts to aid the people of her village in that pursuit.

As a fighter and a fearless advocate for what is right, Preeyawat was determined not to be intimidated by her male colleagues, who outnumbered her in the TAO. In one instance, when the money allocated each village was set at 32,000 baht, TAO members voted to withhold 2,000 baht, but Preeyawat maintained that the full amount should be allocated since she did not want to be part of such a scheme. She also refused to partake in a share of the withheld money as other TAO members intended to do.

Preeyawat pushed keenly for non-physical infrastructure development projects, which have been over-looked and neglected by most



male TAO members. Commenting on the behaviour of many male TAO colleagues she felt that they consumed too much alcohol, were always late for meetings, narrow-minded and driven by their own selfish agenda. Her views on women TAO members were positive: women were careful and cautious with an eye for details. Women try to think and design socially useful projects like income generation schemes and public health schemes to prevent diseases by simple, local means. Contrary to most allegations about women's indecisiveness, Preeyawat thought that women have helped her to be decisive and to make the right decisions.

When she was criticized for the TAO's poor performance, Preeyawat stated that she believed that the TAOs could become viable entities if they were allowed to grow, mature and learn. Since the Ministry of Interior, especially the Local Administration Department has been most reluctant to give up its authority and control, the TAOs have been kept on a short leash. Although they are elected and should be autonomous, they have not been able to liberate themselves from the yoke placed on them by the Ministry via the District officers and the provincial authority, according to a leading officer in the TAO.

Preeyawat wanted get involved in environmental issues as she believed that unsanitary conditions and poor hygiene on pig farms may have caused disease and allergies in the local area. The problem of waste management also needed to be taken seriously.

Uthai Sookcharoen was another woman elected to the TAO (Surasawadee 2003). Her husband gave her a great amount of support and assumed a lion's share of the house work. Since he was a contractor, he routinely took villagers to hospital for treatment in his vehicle. Uthai's success in competing for a political position was in part assisted by her husband's contribution to the welfare of the village in this way. As a result, the villagers repaid her family by taking care of her family's animals and ensuring they were never lost.

Prior to election, Uthai was active in other civic tasks. She participated in the work to protect the forest, which the villagers appreciated. After her entry into formal politics she became aware of male chau-

vinism and exclusionary or discriminatory practices against women because men did not want women to assume power. In her experience, male TAO members liked drinking too much, had to be prodded to do their work and usually complained about being urged to work, and some men siphoned off public resources for their own use, including public construction materials. She believed that women were more conscientious and responsible. They had an eye for details and coordinated and networked well in pursuit of their objectives. Women were also careful with how they expressed themselves, using the right language and words can help solve a lot of problems.

Uthai realized that after pursuing her task in earnest, the TAO male members and the male citizens came to accept and appreciate her. In other words, male prejudice and discrimination can be overcome by persistent efforts and good deeds. Today, the men listen to her advice and even implement some of her ideas, for example the production of wine from local fruit plantations for local consumption.

Sajjai Lertviriyaprapa was the head of the Executive Committee of the TAO in the Lopburi Province (2006, see 'Sajjai Lertviriyaprapa' in references). In 2005, she and her TAO received a number of awards for having applied good governance in its administration and for outstanding child development centres, which provided early childcare. Sajjai was quick to point out that the achievements of her TAO came from good teamwork, as she had enlisted every village under her TAO to have a representative on her advisory team. This mechanism helped gain villagers' support and acceptance of the TAO's programs and projects. Unlike most TAOs that emphasized physical infrastructure, Sajjai put her efforts into education. Her TAO provided the necessary budget to enhance the five schools under its jurisdiction. All students' costs were subsidized so education was truly free for all (although school fees may not be imposed in Thai public schools, most schools still charge extra-curricular fees and other fees which place a burden on the poor families). In addition, her TAO provided free lunches for all the students. The TAO also supported information technology centres and language instruction by employing teachers from abroad to help teach foreign

languages. Saijai was keen on initiating many social projects for the good of the TAO. When she realized the locals' need for the services of a dentist, Saijai created a special scholarship for a local person to study dental hygiene so that a dental specialist could care for the local people. A centre for learning was established to promote further education and an understanding for democracy. Since Saijai felt that villagers may be intimidated by the police station, she coordinated with various parties to enable the presence of a police representative at the TAO office on a daily basis so that villagers could lodge complaints or seek police assistance there.

When the SML, a special government fund, was allocated to her TAO, Saijai devised a scheme to increase participation and to share the resources by breaking it into 31 segments. Each group was allocated 10,000 baht and was to work on a plan for the most useful way of utilizing it. Some groups used it for income generation activities, others used it for clearing up messy, overgrown grass and weeds in their locality, and others used it to improve health by providing shadow boxing or aerobic exercise for the local inhabitants. The flexible approach allowed for the creation of diversified projects to meet the needs of diverse groups. This approach is not generally adopted in Thai public administration, which clings on to the principle of equal treatment and uniformity in service provisions and delivery system.

*Reflections and Analysis on Women Politicians at the Sub-district Level*

The seven cases profiled above provide a glimpse into the lives, thoughts and activities of women leaders at the lowest level of the administrative unit. Although elected leaders for the Ministry of Interior System (like the village head and sub-district head) require coordination and interpersonal skills to succeed in their work, they are bound by the same socio-cultural prejudice and bias against women as those who are elected to run the TAOs.

What the women leaders have in common, although not to the same degree on several points, include the following:

- The elected female local leaders are usually not young. Most of them are in their forties or more. They have grown children who

no longer require their time and attention. In fact, the grown children may actually help to relieve their parents of household duties.

- ✦ In their earlier years, these women had professed to be good mothers, loyal daughters, and attentive older siblings. Such values reflect Thai women's concern for their self-image as the upholders of the family institution. Loyalty to family and filial piety have been ingrained in women since centuries past, so women would feel guilty if they were to succeed in their careers at the expense of family harmony and happiness.
- ✦ It is crucial for women in local politics to have the support and assistance of their families. The larger, more supportive, and more extensive the kinship network a woman has, the more success is anticipated. At the very least, the chances of being elected are higher. The women in our profile have received support in one form or another from their immediate families or even from the legacy of a deceased father. The husbands of at least two of the women described above actively supported their wives' entry into politics, having seen how well they performed as informal leaders in the local context. Women whose husbands had acquired some status in the local context as a professional (e.g. teacher, civil engineer) certainly helped these women gain entry into local social circles.
- ✦ All of the elected women leaders had taken part in civic engagements of one form or another prior to entering the race for a formal position. They had already demonstrated their leadership ability in their service to the community. They had already established a reputation for themselves as community leaders who have done something for the 'common good'. It appears that women can prepare themselves for further social and political engagement through various volunteer groups, which function as an initiation to formal political roles. In all, no female political neophyte can enter into Thai politics and expect to succeed, not even at the lowest level.

- ✦ Local women leaders, at least the more successful ones, need to work hard and to show their ability to solve problems. They have to work hard, even twice as hard as men to prove to their colleagues and constituents that they can perform well.
- ✦ Most of these women were focused on the 'common good' and tried to uphold these goals continually. For example, they worked to thwart a male-engineered corruption scheme and to divert TAO general physical infrastructure projects to social and human development projects. Women's interest in education, health, childcare, the environment, the elderly, and other creative ways of improving quality of life for the local citizens has been demonstrated in these cases. Successful women political leaders do make a difference in people's everyday lives when they focus on quality of life and social or human development dimensions.
- ✦ Women politicians at the TAO level face male chauvinism and conscious discrimination at a variety of levels. As women in a political role, they confront societal scepticism, suspicion and lack of acceptance, at least initially. In spite of their proven contributions as informal leaders, the public still harbours cultural prejudices against women as formal leaders in the political sphere. Local women politicians who were successful have weathered these storms and have proven themselves to their colleagues and constituents, even to the government officials and the larger public in the larger context beyond the TAOs.
- ✦ The elected women leaders believed in the potential efficacy of the TAO and its parallel structure. In other words, while they recognize the limitations and problems that the local systems have, they appear to be optimistic about the possibility for future improvement.

We do not have data on unsuccessful women leaders. Future studies need to look at the women who were unsuccessful to see why they failed. We also need to analyze whether the failures were based on biases and prejudice against women or on other factors as well.

WOMEN LEADERS IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

Moving on from village head, sub-district head, TAO Council members and the TAO Chairperson into the municipal level and wealthy municipal governments, there is a qualitative difference of the elected officials. The two current women mayors and one former mayor of city governments to be profiled here represent local politics from the urban areas. Unlike their rural counterparts, these three women leaders are well educated. They all have a shared history of higher education and successful careers prior to entering politics. All of them are financially well-off, both before and after the election and have not needed to divert their attention from their office to generate money.

Further, they all have a certain elevated social status through marriage, having earned this status in other ways, or a combination of the two. Not unlike their rural counterparts, two of the three women have a background in social engagements, working as civic volunteers and contributing to the 'common good'. The third leader profiled here has worked her way up in politics for 27 years, from a young council member to a mayor. In this case, dedication to public causes and learning the ways of politics via actual practice in politics provided her with a wealth of experience and acceptance from the public for her continued commitment to city administration.

Since I know all three women leaders profiled below, most data came from either formal or informal interviews and conversations, even intimate ones with them over the years. Printed sources on them are used as well but not treated as the essential data source (See internet sources on Premrudee and Tuanjai in bibliography).

Premrudee Champunot, the Mayor of Phitsanulok, has won many awards over the years for her various contributions to city governance. She is currently at the forefront of city administration, a much celebrated mayor who outshines her male counterparts. She was elected to serve as the President of the Municipal League of Thailand and has performed her duties satisfactorily.

Tuanjai's understanding of women's role in politics has under the course of her personal life and during her career been altered as a

result of her experiences. Of all the women politicians I have studied at the local level, she is perhaps the most concerned about gender equality and the promotion of women's participation in national politics. Tuanjai prefers to have women work together in the effort to gain equal status to men. If women do not gain political power in a joint endeavour she is not optimistic about the prospects for women's empowerment in the present political party system or power structure. Tuanjai is also the mastermind and the prime actor in the effort to transform her group, which includes more than 200,000 local level women leaders (who hold formal as well as informal leadership positions) into a women's political party – the first of its kind in Thailand.

*Profiles of Women Leaders at the Municipal Level*

☞ Premrudee, Mayor of Phitsanulok

Let us first examine the life of Premrudee, Mayor of Phitsanulok. We will then look at Somjai, the Mayor of the city of Phuket and conclude with Tuanjai, the former mayor and now the leader of local women politicians.

*Prelude to Politics:* Premrudee Champunot was trained as a nurse and started her career as such, which was a far cry from politics. She married a businessman who later took a keen interest in politics through civic engagement and business expansion. Together, they expanded their business to include a big hotel in Phitsanulok. Their business interests also include a big vocational college. Premrudee assisted her husband in his career through civic activities and engagements. Exposure to social problems and economic woes of the people propelled her to think about finding ways to help solve problems that confront people in their everyday lives.

As a mother and a wife, Premrudee felt that her primary duty was to take care of her family but when the children became older, Premrudee was able to engage in public life. She stood on a strong platform with a lot of support in her quest as she had been active in many social areas over the years, which ensured her a minimal level of leadership experience and earned her respect.

Not unlike other women with a political legacy, Premrudee was accepted. In the Thai context, a woman who is 'ready' for the public role should not be poor or still struggling to get ahead. Premrudee had all the qualifications to make her ready: economic resources, a well-established status and position in provincial society, a record of successful civic engagement and leadership, and grown children who no longer needed her constant attention and nurturing.

*Entry into Politics:* Not unlike many women with similar backgrounds, Premrudee entered into local politics at the city level. Her main objective was to try to improve the administration of the city government, ultimately to provide better services for the people. What Premrudee did not anticipate was the difficulties she had to overcome in order to make a difference. Her life would have been easier if she had decided just to maintain the *status quo* of city administration rather than initiating new ways or trying to implement real change, but Premrudee took her job seriously and worked for significant change and improvement in the city.

*Major initiatives and steps to overcome obstacles:* Premrudee realized that to establish herself as a mayor and to gain people's respect she had to take certain steps and make some daring moves. Some of her many accomplishments have been outlined here.

One of her great achievements was cleaning up rafts in and on the banks of the Nan River that flows through the city. Over the years before the big clean-up, rafts of various sizes started to clutter the river, obstructing smooth passage and gradually transforming the area into a semi-permanent squatter community. The two banks of the river became unmanageable and were controlled by the rafters/squatter community. Not only did the situation get worse due to the obvious pollution to the otherwise attractive river, but the rule of law could not be applied in the ever growing rafter community. The safety of passers-by on the banks of the river also became a problem. It was as if the city had given up its authority and control of that section of the city.

Premrudee tried to negotiate with the parties concerned, using reason and gentle persuasion. She pleaded with them to think of the



public good but her initial attempts were not heeded. In spite of the set-backs she remained determined in her pursuit of change. In an attempt to find a solution to the situation, she started to gauge the public's sentiments about the situation. To her satisfaction she found that the city-dwellers did not like what was happening but they did not know how to solve the problem.

On the basis of this understanding of public opinion on the issue, she became convinced that the clean-up project needed a rallying point, and recognized that health issues could generate broad-based support. Fortified by these agendas which the public would support, Premrudee launched a major campaign to clean up the river. It was an ambitious project. First, she had to secure funding from the central government, not only to relocate the rafters but to clean up and redesign the banks of the river. Everyone was surprised by the size of her budget request. It was around 400 million baht. Her project included making the two banks into an urban park by constructing walking paths around them so people could exercise and enjoy the beauty of the river.

The removal of the rafts became easier as the city residents supported the idea of a scenic river with mini-gardens on the two banks. Moreover, the idea of applying the rule of law in the city was refreshing to the residents. Above all, Premrudee's campaign also appealed to a sense of pride in the city – to make it beautiful and appealing to the tourists. The project, when completed had given the city a new image. The city residents rejoiced in having a safe, clean and green space for public use.

The city allowed for some restaurants and shops by the river. They are regulated by the city and must comply with certain regulations and pay fees to the city. Anyone who goes to Phitsanulok today will see people strolling on the two banks of an uncluttered river.

Premrudee also managed to transfer the main fresh market to a new location. Fresh markets make up an institution in Asian cities. Before the advent of the western-style supermarkets and superstores, fresh markets were the focal points of every city. Each city has many markets but there is always a main market where fresh produce like

meat, fish and all other daily consumption items can be purchased. The fresh markets are often surrounded by shops but the central area where fresh and perishable items are sold by vendors in stalls has a fresh daily supply of goods. To keep the goods fresh, water is sprayed on the produce. Ice in abundance help keep the marine produce fresh. In short, the fresh markets tend to be wet, full of odours, hot and congested. Over time, conditions of the fresh market can become unhygienic, unless special measures are taken to prevent it. A comprehensive clean-up is not easy as the market operates on a daily basis.

The Phitsanulok fresh market was no exception to the above description. As mayor of the city, Premrudee wanted a clean, hygienic, modernized market for the benefit of the residents. It was obvious that the market was too small to accommodate an ever-expanding population. It was also apparent to her that the city needed a much greater area for a market to reduce congestion and to improve levels of health and hygiene. When she broached the idea of moving the market to a new site, there was great opposition, especially from those who profited from that market.

Premrudee found a good site, publicized the advantages of the new place, and took the issue to the public. As the altercations went on over the proposed move, Premrudee used both soft and hard tactics to implement the project. Through continued public relations communication she advanced the issue to convince and persuade all parties about the advantages of moving to the new site. Unlike the river clean-up project, it was difficult to convince people that a new market would be better for all concerned. People were used to the convenience of the location and generally did not want to change, nor could city pride be invoked because a market is not a tourist attraction. There was great uncertainty but Premrudee did not waver; she continued to assure them of the benefits of such an adjustment. Eventually, she managed to convince them that a new, clean, larger and more orderly market would serve the city residents' best interests.

Since Premrudee was convinced that education was essential to people's lives and well-being, she also came to believe that early

childhood education was critical to a person's development. Knowing that the Phitsanulok city school system needed assistance and advice from outside, especially on early childhood education, Premrudee scouted around for help. She finally succeeded in convincing the School of Education of Chulalongkorn University (the oldest and possibly the most prestigious university in Thailand) to assist her. An experimental kindergarten system was initiated in Phitsanulok with the help of the School of Education, bringing great pride to the city. More importantly, it elevated the interest, concern and support of the city residents for better education.

Premrudee initiated a campaign to increase citizens' understanding for the need to pay taxes and to the need to raise the fees charged for services. As is the case in many other cities in Thailand, the fee for a city services like garbage collection was below the cost of delivering the service. While the residents require good services, they are not ready or willing to pay for efficient garbage collection, water treatment, clean streets, and so on. Premrudee decided to reason with the residents about their duties and responsibilities with regards to paying the fees and the need for increasing those fees.

It was a daring effort since she risked turning her supporters against her by asking them to pay higher fees and taxes. Premrudee took a calculated risk, convinced that the city residents needed to understand the financial needs of the city. Again, she launched a public relations campaign. Using various campaign methods utilizing the media, billboards and flyers, she explained her case. She also participated in radio programs to keep the line of communication open, to talk to people and answer their questions. In the end, she was successful and the city residents cooperated.

None of the above projects was easy. Premrudee rose to the challenge, taking on issues which her predecessors had not addressed due to the nature of the projects. Premrudee was advised not to touch these issues because they would be risky for her as an elected politician, but she decided to face the challenges and she combated them with determination, relying on different tactics and strategies. She believed in flexible management but she also believed that some-

times there is a need to show strength in order to be taken seriously. As a woman politician, Premrudee alternated between using gentle persuasion to convince people of her agenda and to impose rules and regulations when needed.

When asked to reflect on her role as a politician, Premrudee thought that her duty had always been to act in the common interest. To her, local government was mainly social development through the improvement of the quality of life for the city residents. Premrudee insisted that women are most suitable for local governance because it is akin to taking care of one's family. She believed that a good local government manager should not see it as a stepping stone toward national government because local government is more about providing services, good housekeeping, seeking solutions to pressing problems that occur within local confines. Premrudee has found it extremely rewarding to be able to manage and control the city's budget and personnel, where she introduced and initiated several human resource development programs and projects for the city staff. The introduction of information technology and the requirement for computer literacy among all city employees is one example of this.

Premrudee promoted the need for self-improvement by studying for an MA in Public Administration on her weekends. Unlike many politicians from national and local levels who clamour for the degree but who are unwilling to take on the workload it entailed, Premrudee took her studies very seriously and attained her degree.

According to Premrudee what defined her success was that she was never arrogant or over-confident. She believed in listening to others, probing and studying problems, and making judgments based on reason. Moreover, she believed that the flexible stance she took made her adaptable to changing conditions. Premrudee also thought that good management requires consultation, planning, human resource development, and organizational development. Above all, she thought that an elected official needs the confidence and trust of the electors.

Hence, Premrudee has never forgotten that her mandate came from those who elected her. Consequently, she made sure to never

be out of touch with them. She would go to them for consultation and inform them of the city's plans and projects, interested in their input. Phitsanulok was one of the first cities in Thailand to have electronic communication with its residents, including a web page and telephone hot-lines. The residents can email the mayor, and she also communicates with them via regular radio programs.

*Looking into the future:* Premrudee insists that her role in city government is rewarding and fulfilling. She harbours no interest or aspirations to become a Member of Parliament. Given her fame and record of success, doors will be opened for her in national politics, however, the prospect of national politics does not appeal to her because she believes in what she can do in local politics and is happy to remain where she believes she will be most useful and effective.

☞ Somjai Suwansupana, Mayor of Phuket City

Phuket is an island province in the Southern part of Thailand, known for its natural scenic beauty as an island paradise, visited annually by visitors around the world. In the past, Phuket was also known for its wealth, generated by tin mining and rubber plantations. As the gem of the Andaman Sea, Phuket has been a prosperous island whose inhabitants have continued to enjoy a higher standard of living than most other provinces in Thailand.

Due to the continuous influx of outsiders to Phuket, it is more cosmopolitan and socially and culturally diverse than most other provinces in Thailand. The nature of local politics has begun to evolve, adding complex dimensions which did not exist in the past. Local leadership in the past was concentrated in families of the commercial pioneers who helped build the island, but non-elite members of society have begun to challenge the old elite. National politics have also penetrated Phuket's local politics, attempting to recruit followers to take charge of local politics. Some headway has been evident but the elite group is working its way back to its former status. Changes in municipal politics seem to have been slower than these changes at the local level, while national political representatives from Phuket also seem to hail from or require the approval of the traditional leadership elite.

Ms Somjai Suwansupana is the current Mayor of Phuket, where the local government has been granted several awards for good governance, especially with regards to the improvements in education. An examination of Somjai's life and work can contribute to a better understanding of women in Thai local politics.

With Chinese ancestors, Somjai's father was old-fashioned in many ways, but not in his desire that his daughter to pursue an education. Somjai did not feel discriminated against as a child because she was a girl, which provided her with a sense of self-esteem and confidence, free to do what she aspired to do. As she was unmarried, her parents and especially her late mother who outlived her father, worried about her future. Consequently, Somjai's mother left her an inheritance and encouraged her brother (to whom she is very close) to include Somjai as a partner in business investments and ventures that he engaged in. Somjai first entered city government 27 years ago with the support of her family, which has lasted throughout her career. With no need to worry about her financial situation Somjai acknowledge the kind of freedom it gave her to pursue civic and political issues.

When asked to be part of a large political team to manage the city government 27 years ago, Somjai was intrigued by the opportunity to work with a group of people with similar aspirations. Many of them were young, had great integrity, and were ready to take action to improve society. Visits abroad, particularly to very poor and desolate parts of the world, left her with a lasting impression, determined to give something back to society.

Friends, who recruited her, felt she was genuine and since she was not driven by her own ulterior motives she would make an excellent member of the team. The idea of a woman in politics was somewhat novel then and was neither well received nor supported. Although she was listed second to last on the list of candidates, with only a slim chance of being elected, Somjai beat the odds. Somjai did not have a significant role during her first years in the city's government, providing her with time to gain some experience in politics.

*Education and social welfare:* It took six years before she had a breakthrough. The then Mayor of Phuket selected her to oversee

educational and social welfare matters. Somjai was delighted since she had a strong interest in this field and she conducted a thorough investigation of the problems that the city of Phuket was experiencing with education. In time, she came to understand the problems present in the educational system, but she also realized that changes take time and cannot be implemented at once. In order to bring about such changes she worked to convince her colleagues, to change teachers' mindsets and improve their working environment, and to involve the parents.

Since she was not a charismatic speaker herself, she compensated by employing a careful methodical approach to understanding the problems by thorough investigation and by listening to the people concerned. With the necessary information she came up with an analysis of the factors behind the problems and a range of possible solutions. Due to her hard work, sincere efforts and humble attitude Somjai earned the approval of her more seasoned political superiors, who served as good role models for her in politics. Somjai received informal tutoring and mentoring from many older politicians. The former mayors Kasem Sutthangkool and Phummisak Hongsyok were her role models. During the course of her career she came to appreciate the value of the contributions and the experience of her older colleagues. Kasem taught her the importance of serving the city government with dedication and with no ulterior motives or self-interest. From Phummiska she learned the significance of good leadership, in the form of coordination skills, involving the empowerment of subordinates by decentralizing power and authority to enable effective action. Somjai believed that in order to become a mature and effective politician one needs to go through a period of apprenticeship, and therefore when politicians are too young and inexperienced, they will not make good leaders.

Somjai's efforts to improve the educational system for the city of Phuket have been successful. In fact the many prizes and awards that Phuket city has received have attested to this success. It not only reflects innovative and creative management but it also reflects courage among the politicians involved, who made experimental changes, which is rare in the Thai political context.

Somjai was determined to upgrade the educational level of city schools. Recognizing that familiarity with computers and foreign languages was crucial to the students, Somjai worked to initiate foreign language learning and computer science earlier in elementary school instead of maintaining the standard of introducing them at the junior high school level. Introducing computer science required investment in hardware and software, as well as education of teachers. It would take too long to wait for a government budget allocation and the standard step-by-step procedures to bring about these changes. Somjai explored the possibilities of alternative methods and decided to cooperate with the private sector. She initiated an open policy for private companies to bid for a program to bring computers to the school. In this arrangement, the school would pay for the courses and instructions the company wished to utilize but would not have to invest in anything. Replacement of broken, outdated machines and maintenance would be the responsibility of the company. This scheme brought computer literacy to a broad base of students and did so much sooner than other methods would have.

As Phuket is a tourist city, foreign language skills are essential. Somjai invited private language schools with native speakers to teach English, and Phuket city school students started to learn English at the elementary school level. After instituting a third and a fourth language requirement Somjai made similar arrangements to engage teachers of other languages, with Mandarin as the preferred third language. The city schools became responsive to the language needs and were able to bypass the constraints and restrictions on foreign language learning faced by most other schools around the country. The success of this initiative leads delegations from other cities to visit, inspired by this development.

To meet the needs of an expanded student population, the city could not wait for the regular budget process to build the necessary facilities (as the city schools improved, more parents outside city jurisdiction tried to enrol their children in the city schools, placing a strain on the city school's physical capacity). Somjai turned to the parents for help and after negotiations they came up with another



innovative and bold move. The parents and the city negotiated with the Government Savings Bank to provide a loan for the expansion. The repayment was to be made by the subsequent government budget allocated for this purpose. It is uncommon for a Thai city government to enter into such a transaction.

With regards to social welfare Somjai has had mixed results. To increase the income among women in the poorer areas of the city, Somjai introduced some ideas for income generating activities such as the production of batik designs on clothes. Many of these activities were also linked to the marketing system and the available network to provide a sustainable income for the women who opted to work from home, having small children to care for.

Health and sanitation were other areas that Somjai took very seriously. It was in her opinion the city's responsibility to provide vaccination and health care for the poor who could not afford it otherwise. Somjai, however, failed in her effort to improve the situation for the elderly. Initially, she envisioned a project to link the elderly to childcare activities within the communities. As mothers need to work to supplement their income and the elderly need extra income and a sense of usefulness and dignity, Somjai initiated a community childcare system where the elderly would look after the children while the mothers were working. The project failed because the mothers did not work away from home, so they visited their children continuously and thereby undermined the role of the elderly as care givers. Children refused to be with the elderly and followed their mothers home.

In another project to have poor women make school uniforms for the students in the city school system, Somjai met with uneven results. The project did provide income for the people, but such a project needed ongoing, external intervention and subsidizing, which is inconsistent with the principles of self-reliance and sustainability.

*Ingredients for success:* Somjai's success as a politician in local government can be attributed to her commitment, dedication and devotion to her work. Having strong support from her family and her late mother provided her with the necessary time to pursue a ca-

reer in politics. To Somjai's credit, she has been a strong team player. Her sense of timing, knowing when to go ahead and when to wait, has generated respect from older male politicians who became her mentors and supporters. Her social skills were of great value in the effort to coordinate different groups of people and projects in order to achieve goals. Although gentle, soft-spoken and never abrasive, Somjai has proven to be decisive, bold and courageous when important decisions needed to be made, for example being firm with educational officials when she wanted the standards and quality of education to be improved.

As a woman politician, Somjai recognized societal prejudice against women in the public domain but she did not allow it to deter her from pursuing her goals. At the end of the day, Somjai believed the results of one's work, if effective and performed with the best of intentions, would guarantee public satisfaction and support. She mentioned that even the teachers, who felt that she was hard on them, came to appreciate the improvements in the schools when their children also benefited from the changes.

It is also worth mentioning Somjai's lengthy and continuous participation in local politics. She has made politics a career, something that most Thai women in politics have not. Women are often leave politics due to disappointments or set-backs such as losing elections, or the attacks on their character and good name that are often employed by political opponents against women politicians. With her increasing fame and her rise to power and stature in politics, Somjai never lost sight of her ideals.

Somjai is determined to continue her work and to strive for improvement. She sees local government as the locus of good governance, the effective centre for good services to the people, and also the foundation for a healthy and strong democratic society. Somjai is happy to remain at this level, where she feels that she is most effective, innovative and useful to society. She has refused, on more than one occasion, to move on to national politics. To Somjai, there is so much work left in the city of Phuket and she is prepared to meet the challenges ahead.

☞ Tuanjai Buraparat

Tuanjai Buraparat is an interesting woman leader in Thai local politics, whose interest and commitment to the participation of women in politics, distinguishes her from most other women politicians. Currently, Tuanjai does not hold any political office but she is a prime mover, organizer and leader of the Women's Local Government Association, which includes a large number of women in various leadership positions, from the grass-roots to the municipal level.

Tuanjai is of the firm belief that women's voices need to be heard and recognized in politics. She is also convinced that the current political party system is neither responsive nor suitable to local women's needs for participation in decision-making. Consequently, over the years, Tuanjai has toiled with the idea of mobilizing women leaders and women voters to seek an alternative venue for political affiliation and expression. Through this association, with a large number of members, including grass-roots women leaders, both women in office and interested and enthusiastic would-be leaders. Currently, Tuanjai plans to transform this association into a women's political party. Purportedly, she now has around 200,000 registered members. To scale up the association into a political party, Tuanjai recognizes the need to incorporate national figures and personalities, preferably well-known and capable women to give it the wider recognition and acceptance that it needs. Their participation is necessary if the party is to be a viable player in politics. Much greater resources and financing are also needed. More players with managerial skills, modern management know-how, and legal and administrative knowledge are required, so while Tuanjai is busy trying to mobilize and rally the local level women leaders, to organize and create a cohesive party, she is also searching for collaborators and support from the larger cities, especially Bangkok.

*Prelude to politics:* Tuanjai's mother had high expectations of her. She had to help out in her mother's business when she became a teenager and while going to university, and consequently became hard-working and diligent, as well as developing a keen sense for business and entrepreneurship. After graduating from university,

she married a physician and led the life of a devoted wife and attentive mother while working as a civil servant. Due to her sense of fair play and her leadership skills, she was often chosen as a leader, albeit informal, no matter where she was.

*Entering politics:* Years later, her husband decided to move away from the city to practice medicine in his home province. Tuanjai regretted having to give up her career, which she enjoyed, but duty and loyalty to one's husband comes first and so she agreed. In the provincial town of her husband's family, Tuanjai was drawn into the family business. To everyone's surprise, she was able to manage it very well, cutting losses, making profits, and forging networks of mutually beneficial alliances in business.

People in town began to recognize her as a strong player in business. Gradually, she became a member of the local chamber of commerce and eventually its leader. While in the leadership position, she was instrumental in making the business community supportive and responsive to social development activities. Consequently, she became the favourite of the local citizens, who admired her leadership and ability to address their needs and problems. When there was an opening for local leadership positions, the local citizens urged her to stand for election. Tuanjai happily agreed, although this was not her original plan. She was voted into office in a landslide victory and became an effective mayor of the municipality.

While in office, Tuanjai felt that women needed to be better represented in politics and decision-making. She was well aware of the differences between the concerns of male versus female politicians. She treated the municipality and its inhabitants with kindness and loving concern. Like a good mother, she wanted the best for the municipality, just as she would for her own family. In the same way a mother would sacrifice for her family, Tuanjai felt she would make sacrifices for her municipality. Her performance far exceeded even her own expectations.

*Out of political office, and into political mobilization:* As her popularity and her stature among women leaders grew, her supporters urged her to seek higher office. The senatorial seat for her province

would be a logical goal. She would not have to deal with party politics: only her own performance would be of significance as it was not a party-based position. Tuanjai entered the race but was not successful. It then dawned on her that national level politics was a different ball-game. Candidates with shorter track records could be successful if the major political party gave the candidate its support. Money was also a factor. The complications of partisan politics have filtered down to the local level to persuade, influence, pressure or even buy over local leaders, who help to influence the voters.

Tuanjai was crestfallen and so disappointed by her loss that she almost gave up politics altogether. After she reflected on and analyzed the situation, she picked herself up, convinced that Thai politics needed a new path. The local people needed to think for themselves and vie for autonomy from the domination of national political parties and the political system. Grass roots and local citizens, particularly women needed to forge their own path by building a political party system that would represent their needs. The new party should be congruent with particular local level women's views and visions.

Gender awareness and a desire for gender equality took root in Tuanjai gradually, in with her childhood. Tuanjai felt that even though her mother was strict, she had been gullible and susceptible to the lies and bullying of her male business partners. Tuanjai had to struggle hard, helping with her mother's business. Gender inequality was blatant in school and at university. She was a capable and intelligent student but male peers took the limelight. Celebrated for her beauty, Tuanjai often felt vulnerable and she had to be careful not to be taken advantage of.

After finishing university, her mother urged her to marry an older, well-established physician. Even though it was not a love match, Tuanjai was determined to be a good wife and mother, however her loyalty and devotion to her husband was not reciprocated. Tuanjai was devastated when she came home one day to find a little girl waiting for her. It was her husband's daughter, born out of wedlock. Although very hurt by this betrayal she adopted the little

girl and raised her as her own. Although she remained married, she could not maintain the same relationship as before. Tuanjai did not want other women to end up in the same situation, putting their own needs and desires, careers and happiness secondary to that of their husbands. Instead, she wanted a society where women could be independent, a society of gender equality. It was in her opinion critical that women be liberated from the traditional norms of society in order to empower them. Furthermore, women needed to be involved in the decision-making processes in the public sphere, from the local level to the national level so that they could serve as role models to other women and be in charge of resource allocation, policy formulation and implementation, to address women's problems and needs.

Her simple and down-to-earth message to local level women and women leaders is powerful and effective. It will be most interesting to see how this local level political movement will unfold. The sheer number of local level women leaders affiliating with each other horizontally is an impressive and rare phenomenon in Thai society because social affiliation tends to be vertical in a patron-client structure. Tuanjai's group defies that normative pattern. Perhaps it is symbolic of new changes in Thai society, in that women can cohere and forge horizontal linkages more successfully than men can. Perhaps because Thai women are not situated in the mainstream of the power structure, they do not have much to gain from it. Therefore women, particularly at the local level, can be pioneers of unconventional methods for redefining politics in the Thai society.

#### CONCLUSION

Women in local politics inhabit a range of political positions, from the village to the sub-district, municipality, and small or large city governments. Both the voters and the candidates vying for local political positions also vary according to the particular socio-cultural, economic and physical environment in which each political position is situated. In a developing country like Thailand, marked contrasts exist between villages or even sub-districts in poor remote provinces from the complex, diverse and vibrant Bangkok metropolis, however

Bangkok and the remote TAOs are both subsumed under the local government system. As such, the women and men who participate in local politics can have quite different experiences in terms of education, socio-economic background, and life experiences, outlook, values and mindset.

One common thread that ties all these women together is the constraints on their participation in politics. Socio-cultural and historical antecedents which demarcated the public sphere for men and the private sphere for women is one major hindrance. The values and mindset of the Thai people undermine women's leadership and decision-making ability, and have kept women from venturing into the political domain. Socialized roles of women as the primary caregivers for the family exclude women from active public participation when the children are young. Public scrutiny and the public's stringent attitudes toward women politicians have all served to keep women out of the political sphere. In the words of a woman leader in a seminar organized for 60 local women leaders in Phitsanulok Province in August 2006, 'It is difficult for women to do well in politics. But it is even more difficult to entice other women to follow in our footsteps.'

Salient points from this study include the following observations:

- ✦ Most women politicians at different levels encounter some barriers and constraints because they are women. This was manifested in their different comments about how the men do not welcome them in the TAO or how the men have undermined their suggestions or proposals. At the higher level, women mayors have to work hard and continuously prove themselves worthy of acceptance.
- ✦ Women politicians also recognize that they need to work hard to gain recognition. In fact, this may have motivated some of them to outperform their male colleagues.
- ✦ Many women politicians at the local level, especially in the TAOs, look for capacity-building opportunities. It is not easy to

understand the tedious and cumbersome rules and regulations, and the complex bureaucratic procedures and process. Women politicians often need to strengthen their own confidence and self-esteem. They need to build networks to create an environment of mutual assistance and support. Women politicians have asked for support after they have been elected and they have expressed the need for continuous advice and technical assistance. In the words of one woman politician at the 2006 seminar, 'We need assistance to perform well so that we can be re-elected.'

- ✦ Women politicians also need to build strong alliances and create an environment of solidarity. They have much to learn from each other. The experiences of the women politicians described above can help the newcomers tremendously. Moreover, mentorship and inspiration are also important.
- ✦ It is interesting that many local level women politicians expressed no desire to excel in national politics, wishing only to do well in the local context. Only one of the ten women profiled in this study aspired to national politics. It is uncertain at this point whether the women were being pragmatic or are truly content to excel in the local context. Could it be an innate fear to compete at a different level? If very capable women politicians remain in local politics, national politics will be void of their contributions. Can successful women in local government fare as well in national politics? We do not yet have answers to these questions.
- ✦ One unresolved issue continues to be problematic: if successful women politicians had to be financially independent and comfortable, is politics an exclusive domain for rich women rather than poor women? How can poor women aspire to political participation?
- ✦ In this study, I also found that the women politicians I studied tend to have an open style, working with people in a somewhat egalitarian manner, using the tools of communication and listening. They solved problems by going directly to the parties in



question and discuss things, searching for a mutually agreeable solution. In other words, the much talked about 'sweet demeanour, 'good language' and good coordinating ability seem to refer to a style of behaviour which women politicians tend to adopt, congruent with the behaviour prescribed for a well-mannered woman in Thai culture. Using abrasive language or even being direct may rub men and even some women the wrong way in the Thai context. The challenge for women politicians is to appear soft and gentle on the outside but to get things done. Many have succeeded to convince others after using reason and persuasion.

- ✦ There are many examples of women politicians' distaste for corruption. In fact they have tried to stop corruption, or at the very least, tried not to be a part of it. Moreover, some women politicians disapprove of their male counterparts' behaviour in siphoning off money or even taking construction materials from the public for their own use.
- ✦ Women politicians work horizontally in a cooperative and collaborative manner with their constituents, government agencies and male colleagues. It is a style which engenders horizontal affiliation, partnership and mutual benefits. This approach needs to be strengthened and promoted in Thai society where social affiliation is traditionally vertically based in a patron-client structure. Women's way of operating is in fact more conducive to the building of democracy and democratic values and processes.

Perhaps this is a glimpse of what true democracy in Thai society could look like, but it will only be possible if more women participate in politics. This is a glimpse that merits further in-depth study and presents a way forward.

#### REFERENCES

- Boonsong Wetyasirin (1998) 'Women's Decision Making in Entering Tambon Administrative Organization: The Case of Various Tambons in Bannhong District of Lamphun'. Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University. [In Thai]

- Editorial (1994) 'Outstanding Persons of the Month – Eaujit Towthumma.' *Journal of District and Village Heads*, pp. 19-21. [In Thai]
- Editorial (1994) 'Outstanding Persons of the Month – Malichien Pengwong.' *Journal of District and Village Heads*, pp. 22-23. [In Thai]
- Editorial (2000) 'Thongdee Pohyong.' *Matichon Daily Newspaper*, 6 October, p.14. [In Thai]
- Kaewkasikij, Kannika (2001) 'Premrudee Chompunot: The Iron Chair-woman of Asia Pacific.' *Matichon Daily Newspaper*, 2 July, p.21. [In Thai]
- Marpraneet, Hathairat (2003) 'Gender Differences in Representation of Subdistrict Administration Organization (SAO) Members in Kalasin Province, Thailand.' Dissertations in Women's Studies, Political Science, Utah State University.
- Noppabhadol Vissessuwannaphoom (2001) 'Muslim Women's Political Participation: Case Study of Muang Municipality, Pattani Province.' Master of Arts in Social Development. National Institute of Development Administration. Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration. [In Thai]
- Piyaporn Labpromrat (1999) 'Acceptance of Women's Political Roles: A Case Study of Members of Provincial Administration Organization Council in the Central Region of Thailand.' Master of Arts in Social Development. Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration. [In Thai]
- Pornpen Pechsuksiri (2005) 'A Study of Direct Stakeholders' Opinions toward Women's Local Government Participation in Thailand: Case Studies of Tambon Administration Organizations in Four Provinces from Four Regions.' Available at <http://www.women-family.go.th/index.htm>.
- Prateep Chongsubthum (1985) 'Women Leaders in Thai Local Administration: A Study of the Role of Women Chiefs of Village and Tambon throughout the Country in the Year 1985.' Chulalongkorn University. [In Thai]
- Rawiwan Wannapanich (1997) 'Factors Influencing the Acceptance of Political Roles of Female Local Leaders: A Study of the Warded Women Chiefs of Village and Tambon of the Year 1997.' Chulalongkorn University. [In Thai]
- 'Saijai Lertviriyaprapa' (2006) available at <http://www.gdrif.org/woman2/woman-49.htm>.
- Sasiporn Sihiponthu (1996) 'Conditions for Women to Enter Politics

- and Acceptance of Women Representatives.' MA Thesis, Thammasat University. [In Thai]
- Smira Chittaladakorn (1986) 'Women in Leadership in Thai Local Administration'. Chulalongkorn University. [In Thai]
- 'Somjai Suwansupana' (2006) available at <http://www.gdrif.org/woman2/woman-49.htm>.
- Supaporn Yuwattana (1993) 'Acceptance of Thai Women's Political Role'. MA Thesis, Thammasat University. [In Thai]
- 'Suphannok, Seri' (2000) 'Sirinporn Gonthong: The Iron Woman'. *Matichon Daily Newspaper*, 25 September, p.24. [In Thai]
- Surasawadee Hunyont (2003) 'Women and Participation Role in Tambon Administrative Organization: Social, Cultural and Political Context'. Thammasat University.
- Suthinee Metheepapa (2002) 'Bangkok Women's Political Participation'. Master of Arts in Social Development. National Institute of Development Administration. [In Thai]
- 'Tuanjai Burapat' (2005) available at <[http://www2.nesac.go/nesac/th/about/members\\_detail.php?did=06100003](http://www2.nesac.go/nesac/th/about/members_detail.php?did=06100003)>
- UNDP (2006) *Women's Rights to a Political Voice in Thailand. Millennium Development Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women*. Women for Democratic Development Foundation. New York: United Nations Development Program.
- Voralux Manutaursiri (1995) 'Factors Affecting Performance of Tambon Women Development Committees'. Master of Arts in Social Development. National Institute of Development Administration. [In Thai]
- Yoawalux Saadchom (1997) Participation of Woman in District Administration Organization. MA Thesis, Krirk University. [In Thai]