

Women's Status in Transitional Societies

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It is widely held that the Thai economy's high growth rate is propelled by the manufacturing sector. Manufacturing value added at 1972 prices almost tripled between 1970 and 1980, and more than doubled between 1980 and 1990. The share of manufacturing value added in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose from 16 percent in 1970 to 21.7 percent in 1980, and 24.7 percent in 1990. Manufactured exports exceeded agricultural exports for the first time in 1985, and in 1991 accounted for 76 percent of total export earnings.

In a society characterized by rapid growth, one of the more relevant questions is how growth affects the welfare of different social groups. Women are often thought to belong to a disadvantaged group. This paper traces Thai women's participation in the work force and the change in their economic and social status during the last two decades.

ENTRY INTO THE WORK FORCE¹

Until 1980, Thailand was a land-abundant country, with land-man ratios actually increasing in the lower North. The commodity boom of the mid-1970s further provided incentives for land expansion. Agriculture was then the largest source of labor for both men and women. Increases in irrigated areas throughout the 1970s further fuelled the demand for agricultural labor.

In 1974, apart from agriculture, the female work force was largely absorbed during the wet season in the commerce sector, followed by manufacturing and services. The pattern of male employment was slightly different. After agriculture, men tended to hold jobs in the service and manufacturing sectors.

As the supply of land became scarce, women were the first group of household laborers released from agriculture. Between 1983 and 1988, there was a net withdrawal of female workers from the agricultural sector, even in the wet season. The easing of labor supply rendered labor-intensive manufacturing a profitable proposition. The manufacturing industries of Thailand, fostered by the protection of domestic markets since 1960, thus began to take off and became export-driven in the 1980s. Along with the structural changes outlined above, women were extensively drawn from home-based employment to outside employment.

Toward the end of the 1980s, the commerce sector remained the largest employment generator for the female work force, while the manufacturing sector emerged as an important employment source for incremental female labor. The number of incremental females joining the manufacturing work force in the wet season actually exceeded, in numbers, the incremental male labor (see [Figure 1](#)). The entry of incremental labor into manufacturing in the wet season suggests that employment in the manufacturing sector has become a year-round activity for women. [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) clearly show the convergence in both the farm and the non-farm sectors. Since the mid 1980s, rural women have become permanent members of the industrial work force.

This large pool of young, trainable, and obedient workers has become the backbone of light export industries, bringing unprecedented growth to the manufacturing sector.

CHANGES IN FEMALE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Consistent with the increased participation in the work force, the income contributions of women have also improved over time. [Table 1](#) is compiled on the basis of data from Household Socioeconomic Surveys of 1976 (11,362 samples) and 1988 (11,045 samples). Both show that the contribution of women to household cash income increased between 1976 and 1988 in all regions. The increase is most apparent in the Greater Bangkok area. During this period, the shares of women's cash income increased from 0.24 in 1976 to 0.32 in 1988 for the whole Kingdom. For the North, the shares were 0.22 in 1976 and 0.30 in 1988. The same set of data ([Table 2](#)) also shows that the largest source of women's cash income used to be in profits (47 percent), reflecting a high level of women's participation in commerce, shifting to income from wages and salaries (60 percent) in 1988. The reduction of the importance of "other" income could be a result of the expansion of the formal financial sector which, in turn, reduced interest-earning opportunities.

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OVER TIME

On the basis of the Household Socioeconomic Surveys of 1976 and 1988, women's access to education has also improved over the last decade. The number of years in school has increased for both men and women ([Table 3](#)). For the lower age groups, the data suggest a catching-up process between men and women. In 1976, for example, household members between 25 and 35 years of age were reported to have a maximum education of 8.5 years for females and 9.3 years for males. In 1988, these figures increased to 10.9 and 10.7 years, respectively. The catching-up process is found in all age groups and is especially pronounced in the younger generation. The last column in Table 3 was derived by comparing the number of households where female family members had more education than male family members of the same age group. This proportion is thus increasing for all age groups and the increase is most pronounced for the group aged between 25 to 35 years. The proportion of families with female members having higher education is approaching one percent.

This finding is consistent with a cross-country study, which suggests that the gap between the male and female enrollment ratio is closing as national income increases. The ratio of schooling years of females to males ranges from 1.0 in the case of high income industrially-advanced countries to 0.83 for East Asia, excluding Japan, and 0.45 for South Asia.

While the macro and long-term data both show the improving status of Thai women, many questions are still unanswered. Why do Thai women, for example, have a significant role in services and commerce? Do women enter into higher paying or lower paying jobs in these industries? Are women restricted de facto or de jure to the use of family properties for investment in non-farm activities? What is the pattern of entry and promotion in the industrial work force? What are their occupational hazards? What are the conditions of their work places and how are safety standards? How is the social bond that protects women in rural societies broken by city migration and how is the social status of women changed as they enter their new roles? Systematic research into these problems would greatly facilitate a more logical and balanced approach to the further development of women in Thai society.

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