

Thailand may avoid plunging deeper into crisis
if it lends an ear to the wisdom of country women

Old Wives' Tale

by Sanitsuda Ekachai

Miya Hawa speaks with a strong southern accent. But if Thailand listens carefully, the country might learn from her a key to surviving a national crisis.

"Forget money if it ends up destroying our family and community ties," said Miya, a mother of two from Trang Province. "And take good care of the environment. For we cannot live if nature dies."

That is not all, she added: "The government often ignores the law and us, the rural poor, in favor of the rich and powerful. So we must get organized."

Miya knows what she is talking about. She has seen too many local fishing families broken down when big trawlers cleaned up the coastal seas of Haad Jai Mai, forcing young mothers to work in factories instead of keeping homes.

To protect the seas "for our children," Miya has been working shoulder to shoulder for over a decade with southern small fishermen to keep the trawlers at bay.

"The fish have now returned. Husbands no longer have to work

as hired hands on big trawlers. Wives no longer have to leave their children to work in factories in the towns," she reported, flashing her toothy smile with pride. "We can avoid a lot of problems if we get our priorities right."

Miya's pearls of wisdom come in handy when the crippled countryside is set to suffer another wave of hardship as an exodus of migrant workers are returning home to joblessness and hunger.

Short of state measures and budgets to cushion the impacts of economic recession on rural communities, experts predict a rise in the commerce of vices—among them prostitution, child labour and drugs—as families struggle to cope with the collapse of the national economy.

Domestic violence will also intensify. "The poor must suffer the economic crisis which they have not created," said economist Dr. Pasuk Pongpaichitr from the Faculty of Economics at Chulalongkorn University. "And among the rural poor, women and children will be hardest hit because they're the weakest."

In the wake of new hardship, a group of grassroots women leaders met with academics, development workers and gender

activists in October 1997 to map out strategies to cope with the crisis.

Entitled "Rural Women's Visions: Solutions to Rural Development Problems", the gathering was jointly organized by the Friends of Women Foundation, the National Women's Commission, Thailand Development Support Committee, the Rural Reconstruction Alumni and Friends Association, the Social Research Institute, *Bangkok Post* and Matichon.

"MARKET FORCES"

Unlike urban professionals who remain faithful to capitalistic economic development, Miya and other grassroots women leaders have become disillusioned with Thailand's unbridled market economy.

"It has been clear to us that our country's economic development only makes the poor poorer and the rich richer," said Sa-ing Tawaisin from Roi Et. "Our forests have been destroyed. Our rivers polluted. Our lands confiscated. Our communities and families torn apart. Even when the economy finally picks up, it won't benefit us rural poor any."

Various studies have confirmed time and again that

Thailand's breakneck economic development has siphoned the natural resources from its agricultural sector to feed the industries.

In four decades, the forests, which once covered half of the land mass, have been reduced to a pitiful 15 percent due to logging and extensive land clearing caused by the state's policy of

from nature through land confiscation and pollution, she said. Not freely available as before, food must now be bought. Farm chemicals have contaminated the soil and water while endangering farmers' health. In addition, the use of farm technology has ground to a halt due to prolonged mass migration and the state's lack of support.

machines have reduced men's farm work, women must still toil long hours as before in addition to doing household chores.

According to Chanida, Thai male farmers work an average of 2,300 hours a year compared to women's 3,900 hours. Gender inequality continues when women join the workforce. Women earn only half of men's income in the

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promoting cash crops for export in order to earn foreign exchange.

The cash-crop economy and the "Green Revolution," however, have plunged farmers deeper into debt because of the requisite high investment in farm chemicals, uncontrollable price fluctuations and low returns.

To free their families from bankruptcy, as well as to enjoy the consumer lifestyle of the city people, the able-bodied young leave their villages to work as cheap labour and risk health hazards in the cities. Many young women sell their bodies. Meanwhile, the rural communities stand by helplessly as the bureaucracy-backed money barons and industrialists ravage their environment and their sources of livelihood for quick money.

"More than 50 percent of the spoils from the economic boom has gone to the country's top 10 percent in terms of wealth," said economist Dr. Pasuk. "These people are big businessmen, financiers, politicians and policy-making elites."

Meanwhile, the boom has destroyed the poor's basic life support such as food security

"The poor suffer—whether it's boom or bust. And when the migrant workers return home, they will have to start over in conflict-ridden communities with little remaining natural resources," added Dr. Pasuk.

According to researcher Chanida Chanyapaet of the Social Research Institute, the status of rural women has declined since the advent of the market economy.

In traditional farm families—which were basically monogamous—the wives had a say in both farm and family matters because women shared the work equally with men. The land also often belongs to the wives' families.

All this changed with the cash economy. "Money has become the only yardstick to measure one's worth," said Chanida. Since women's domestic and farm chores are not considered financially productive, women suffer low self-esteem because they are not the ones who bring home the money.

Women have also lost their roles in modern farming, she added. Their role as developers of plant varieties has been lost to seed companies. And while

same jobs with the only exceptions being a few professional occupations, she added.

"As cheap labour, female workers must do the more repetitive and laborious work for less pay. Apart from suffering a host of occupational hazards, they are doubly pressured by social expectations not to fail as wives and mothers.

"And when the economy busts, it's the female workers who are laid off first because of the lack of job security and their own submissiveness," she explained. Of the two million workers who will be out of jobs due to massive factory layoffs, the majority will be women.

"MAMA SAID"

At the Selapum district in Roi Et, a caravan of trucks is ferrying young migrant workers home, bringing with them not only more mouths to feed but also city values, alienation and family tensions.

"Young girls dye their hair red and wear tight jeans," complained farmer Sumontha Laochai. "Parents are powerless as teenagers kiss and cuddle at night and defy other traditions. The

young no longer want to work on the land. How can we cope with this generation of rural youths?"

Coping can start with getting inspiration from their rural mothers whose commitment to their villages has resuscitated both their families and their communities.

Role models are not lacking as more and more village women have become disillusioned with mainstream development. "But we must redefine our values first. We cannot change things around if we think money is everything," said Miya. "We must think beyond ourselves and not be afraid of hard work."

Women's traditional roles as nurturers of family well-being has pushed many mothers to join grassroots environmental movements and other community welfare activities.

Sa-ing Tawaisin, a mother of four from Roi Et, for example, has fought tooth and nail with big business and the Forestry Department until her Dong Mae Pek community won land security and the right to manage their community forests.

But winning land rights is not the end of the problem. Sumontha Laochai, also from Roi Et, has opted for organic and mixed farming after realising that monocrop chemical farming destroys both the soil and her family's health.

Apart from regaining food security, the year-round income from mixed farming has freed her family from debt. Learning from her success, now more than 300 farm families in her area have switched to organic, mixed farming.

Changing farm methods has brought more than the revival of their soil and ecosystems. "By staying true to the land, our families stay together," said

Sumontha. "The children feel emotionally secure. This is more valuable than money."

Sompan Jandaeng, head of Baan Don Kaen Housewives Group in Roi Et, and Kanittha Wongnikorn, head of Baan Bo Kul Savings Group in Songkhla, have also shown how the community benefits when mothers join forces.

Starting from a handful of members, Sompan set up a natural-dye hand-woven group called Panmai which has now become a well-known cottage industry. The group has since expanded into a community-run gas station and life insurance scheme.

"If we don't organise, we won't have any bargaining power in the market," she reasoned.

Like Sompan, Kanittha has turned to women's domestic skills to save her community. "Ours used to be a farm community but all that changed when factories came," she recalled. "Mothers became wage earners, toiling for 120 baht a day, while their families slowly fell apart."

GETTING ORGANISED

As a way out, the housewives' group makes natural sugarcane to sell. They also set up a savings group to help free members from loan sharks. Parts of business profits and savings interest go to various welfare funds to cover members' health expenses, life insurance and their children's education.

From 60 founding members, the group has grown to more than 1,000, with revolving funds of three million baht.

"We faced much resistance when we started all this," recalled Kanittha. Night meetings and field trips upset many husbands. "Some even refused to let us in the home when we returned late. But we must believe in our

conviction and make sacrifices."

What are the lessons for other rural women? One of them, according to economist Pasuk, is that mainstream economic development which exploits rural folk as cheap labour is no answer for Thailand.

"But subsistence farming is no answer either," she stressed. Self-reliance, the use of time-tested women's traditional skills and materials—and particularly the ability to connect with the market while maintaining control of production and management procedures—are all important to the success of women's grassroots businesses.

Another message, she added, is that there is no dead end for rural Thailand if the people stay put to revive their environment, moral system and community ties.

"The most important thing right now is to stop the government's big development projects which destroy the environment which is the rural people's life support system," she urged.

Meanwhile, rural women leaders must enter their village's administrative bodies in greater numbers so that they can channel the budgets to community welfare schemes.

"Women are brought up to believe in self-sacrifice, hard work, compromises, honesty and caring for others," said Amporn Sukhontawanich of Friends of Women Foundation.

"Many rural women have proved that they can save their families and communities when they stay true to these values instead of going along with greed-driven development.

"We can disregard their wisdom at our society's peril."

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