

# Crisis *pushes* girls **OUT** of Schools

by Teena Amrit Gill

BANGKOK—Sitting outside her family's home in northern Thailand, Arooni helps prepare the family's midday meal, at the same time keeping an eye on her younger sibling.

She is 14 years old and ought to be in school. But her father just lost his job, one of the many victims of the economic crisis plaguing Thailand since mid-1997—and her family can no longer pay for her education.

Now Arooni spends her time at home helping her parents out with household chores, but hopes, and dreams, that one day she may be able to complete her studies, and become a teacher.

She is not alone in her experiences and probably, in her dreams.

In the last academic year alone, since the deepening of the impact of the financial crisis, some 400,000 children are estimated to have had to drop out of school in Thailand.

And this is at the primary level alone, where education is compulsory. In secondary school, which is not compulsory, the number of dropouts is expected to be even higher.

Although no disaggregated statistics are yet available, a large chunk of those children who can no longer continue with their education because they are too poor to do so, are girls.

"Many girls have had to leave school," says Acharn Bupa Wattanapun, a lecturer at the Faculty of Education at Chiang Mai University.

"This is because old cultural values have still not changed," Acharn adds. "If parents must choose between sending their daughters, or sons, to school, they would prefer to send their sons. Because they feel that girls don't need an education as much, as they will get married and need to take care of their families."

While such patriarchal cultural values are undoubtedly part of the problem, there are many

other factors at work, like the structure of the education system.

While primary level schools exist right across the country, down to the provincial and village level, secondary schools are usually located in the provinces' main town. Thus, if girls want to continue with education they must become boarders, a prospect which not many parents fancy.

"Parents do not want to send their girls to boarding schools," says Acharn, "because they feel they are out of their control and might go astray."

Added to such fears, and insecure school environments for children, is of course the impact of the economic crisis on the increasingly impoverished working, and lower middle, class.

While more than 3 million workers have lost their jobs since the crisis, most of whom are women, another 2.1 million are underemployed and living below the official poverty line, says UNICEF-Thailand.

"Assuming that each worker is supporting one child in school, there will be 5.1 million children at risk," adds Fida Shah, in charge of UNICEF-Thailand. Thailand's total population is just over 60 million.

"What needs to be also asked," says a university student in Chiang Mai, "is what is the real meaning of compulsory and supposedly free education."

"The fees may be free but children at primary level have to buy their own books, uniforms, lunch and even pay for transport to get them to school. How many parents can afford this today?" she asks.

At the secondary level, parents do not only have to continue paying for textbooks, uniforms and food, but pay fees as well.

One of the alternative options for poor students is a scheme initiated about two years ago by the Thai Office of National Primary Education, called expanded opportunity schools.

Attached to primary schools is the facility for tuition-free lower secondary education, with need-based uniform and textbook assistance schemes.

According to the Ministry of Education, close to 580,000 students are now taking advantage of this facility.

But critics say the contradiction is that until the onset of the economic crisis in 1997, the government was actively encouraging students graduating from primary schools to join its then booming export-oriented manufacturing sector.

"It will take a long time before education is once again considered important enough to pursue right up to the secondary let alone the tertiary level," says a former student activist in Bangkok.

Even today, secondary-level enrolment ratios are among the lowest in the region with only 37.5 percent of children in the eligible age group attending secondary schools. In China this figure is close to 70 percent.

The government has undoubtedly played an important role in promoting equal access to education, and today the enrolment ratios for both boys and girls at primary and secondary school are almost the same.

But the Buddhist temples in Thailand, where Buddhism is the state religion, have on the other hand played a negative role, say critics.

Some 380 temple schools across the country provide a highly subsidised education with free lodging to over 70,000 secondary-level students, who can choose to continue up to university level in state-recognised universities. Girls however, are denied access to any of these facilities.

"It is indeed very unfortunate that girls cannot attend Buddhist temple schools," says the principal of an expanded opportunity school outside Chiang Mai.

"Other than the fact that they are denied educational facilities offered to boys, it sends the wrong message—that girls are not worthy of an education," the principal adds.

As the crisis enters its second year it is becoming increasingly clear it may take many years for the Thai economy to turn around again.

Meantime, more and more children will be pulled out of schools and sent out to work, under increasingly hazardous and exploitative conditions.

In 1993 alone some 4.1 million children between the ages of 13 to 19 were estimated to be working. The figure today is estimated to be substantially higher.

Unless the state can ensure an affordable and practical education for girls—and boys—there will be too many like Arooni whose hopes and aspirations will be crushed by forces far beyond their control.

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