

Taking up an Unpopular Advocacy

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

In the year 2000, five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing, China in 1995, governments, women's groups, NGOs and the international community will assess the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the major output document approved at that conference and the Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women developed earlier in the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985.

Both documents aim to remove all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private lives. In both documents, the issue of women's political participation was a major point for discussion. However, initial assessments indicate that the fundamental changes aspired for in relation to this issue have not been met. The Women in Politics Institute of Thailand, a pioneering women's NGO, has recognised the lack of attention given to this issue and has taken on the task of lobbying other NGOs, political parties and the government to address the issue of women's political participation.

The force behind the groundbreaking work of the Women in Politics Institute (WIP) is a woman with a formidable background. Dr. Pusadee Tamthai, the current Director of WIP, has a masteral and doctorate degree in General Science and Science Education respectively, from Indiana University in the United States. She earned her bachelor's degree in Chemistry from Kasetsart University in Thailand where she also served as a Science lecturer for over two decades. Apart from her academic involvement, Dr. Tamthai also hosts and produces radio programmes targeting women listeners. She is active in other cause-oriented organisations that take up the issues of peace and justice.

In this interview, Dr. Tamthai discusses with Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, Isis' Communications Programme Officer, how WIP aims to achieve its goal of equal participation of women and men in political decision-making.

Q: Tell us about the Women in Politics Institute. What are its programmes and services?

A: The Women in Politics Institute (WIP) is a nonprofit organisation under the umbrella of the Women for Democratic Development Foundation (WDDF), a nongovernmental organisation. Its aims are to support and promote women's political participation as voters, supporters and

candidates at all levels. It also hopes to raise political awareness and consciousness among the general public, women and youth in particular. WIP programmes and services include training in conducting campaigns, dissemination of information on social and political issues, strengthening local women's organisations in areas of politics, and networking with women's groups.



Dr. Pusadee Tamthai (left, seated) with the author (right, seated) and two Thai friends

Q: What have been your major campaigns and how did you carry these out?

A: We have conducted two major campaigns so far. These are on women's political participation as voters, supporters, and candidates and women's participation in the legislative process. Our campaign activities included training, seminars, discussions among women leaders, radio programs, and meetings with political party leaders. We also helped create support groups for political involvement.

Q: One of the strategic objectives in the section on Women in Power and Decision-making in the Beijing Platform for Action urges governments and political parties to take measures to ensure equal access and full participation of women in power structures and decision-making. What are the accomplishments here in Thailand along this line?

A: In the senate, women now comprise 8.1 percent of the membership (compared to 2.6 percent in 1996). In the government, more women have been appointed to high-ranking positions. Those holding top administrative positions (level 9-11) in various ministries comprise 18.3 percent (compared to ten percent in 1993). As far as legislation is concerned, laws and regulations that discriminated against women in government have been amended. For example, before 1993, they could not hold certain positions such as subdistrict head, village head, district chief officer, provincial governors. And only since 1996 have women been promoted to the rank of general in the military.

The National Commission on Women's Affairs (NCWA), the only government office in charge of ensuring women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making, is going through a restructuring process so as to become more powerful. As for political parties, after being occasionally approached by a collective group of women's organisations, they have become more open and receptive to the idea that women's participation is necessary. Nonetheless no political party has agreed to adopt a quota system, or even a policy to take special measures to promote women's participation in politics.

Q: How do you plan to get more NGOs to tackle the issue of women's political participation?

A: WIP has conducted seminars among women's NGOs to discuss the fact that their focus on various issues such as violence against women, women trafficking, cannot be tackled effectively without political will and commitment. Therefore, we all need to join hands to raise these issues at the policy level. And of course, with more women at the decision-making levels, it is likely that such issues will be effectively taken up.

Q: Is there a potential for women in Thailand to come up with a women's vote?

A: There is a very big potential but it is untapped. Last year, WIP organised a series of seminars entitled "Vote for a Change." The seminars aimed to educate voters on how to make their choices, what should be taken into consideration, in order that we can all make better choices for transformative politics. We also stressed in the seminars that political negotiations through interest groups such as women's NGOs can and should be done for the benefit of a greater number of people.

In the last national elections in 1996, women voters outnumbered the men by over a million. And there we raised this question: what did women get? Nothing. Violence against women is still prevalent, and sadly, to a higher degree.

However, I strongly believe that women's apathy towards politics will not last forever. Why? Because women care a lot about social issues, about people, about the environment. As women, we would like to ensure our children's future. More importantly, after decentralisation of power was implemented in 1995, where local representatives are directly elected by the villagers, women began to realize that their community projects have not been getting the necessary support, particularly from the local budget, because political positions are dominated by men. They are now seeing the need for a critical mass of women at decision-making levels.

Q: Do you see the formation of a women's political party in Thailand in the near future?



A: People have been talking about that for quite some time. The opposing argument was that if we advocate for gender equality, then having an all-woman party is against what we stand for. The supporting argument was that having a women's party is perhaps, at least for now, the only effective way to increase the number of women representatives in the parliament. This idea needs more thought. We do not want to send a wrong signal nor make waves unnecessarily.

Q: Doing all these for the Women's Institute in Politics, have you yourself been interested to enter politics?

A: I've always been interested in politics but to stand for election is not an easy decision to make. At present I'd rather work hard as a supporter trying to make some changes. Perhaps, for now, I, with no affiliation with any party, am in a better position to talk effectively about politics to the general public.

Q: How many women occupy elective positions at the local and national level at present?

A: At the local level, women account for approximately seven percent of elected members of provincial, municipal, and subdistrict administrative councils, and two percent of elected subdistrict and village chiefs. At the national level, women comprise six percent of the seats in the House of Representatives, 22 out of 393.

Q: What do you think are the key issues for Thai women that the 22 women parliamentarians should address?

A: Definitely education, gender equality, violence against women and children and the impact of the economic crisis. With regards to violence against women, I think politicians should push their own parties to come up with significant measures, for example setting up at least a one-stop crisis center in each province. One very concrete thing that they should also look into is women's security in the precincts—even the roads leading to the precincts are not well-lit. The economic crisis, because now that many factories and companies have closed, women are the first ones to be laid off. Studies show that 70-80 percent of a woman's income is spent on the family's needs. So with thousands and thousands of women out of a job, you have entire families not meeting their

basic needs.

Moreover, we still have quite a number of laws that need to be amended. Family laws and the name bill, for example. At present women still have to change their last name when they get married. I think this is not relevant anymore and therefore should be repealed.

Q: In the last few years, have you seen an increase in the participation of women in politics?

A: I would say yes, at all levels. Not only to run as candidates but also as campaigners and supporters. Also, in general, more women are getting interested in politics. They are eager to learn more about political processes, to know what's going on in the women's movement. For example, when CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) was signed and ratified, not many people, including women, knew much about it here in Thailand. With the campaigns conducted by women's organisations and the NCWA, more women now know about CEDAW.

Q: What major problems have you encountered in your work in WIP so far and what are the lessons that you have drawn from these?

A: There are several problems. One is the attitude towards women's roles and the concept of gender among the general public. Women and men have been influenced and moulded by our traditions, way of life and the socialisation process. It is not easy for women to release themselves from these chains. Gender-related issues need to be discussed more often and more openly. The other problem has to do with generating financial support within the country. "Politics and political activities" are still perceived as "unclean, power-seeking, etc." Many people find it hard to believe that individuals, groups, and organisations such as WIP can and do carry out political activities for the benefit of the general public rather than to benefit themselves or certain politicians or political parties. Very few individuals and organisations are willing to make contributions towards such groups as WIP. We need to focus more on popularising this kind of work. ♪