



# Thailand's Working Class Women

By Sarah Dotson

## Introduction

*Since the '70s Decade for Women, feminists from developing countries have sought to create a bottom-up empowerment approach to development that would break down existing class, culture, state, and gender structures. In a study of macroeconomic policies, Elson and Catagay (2000) support the call to put social needs back into international policy. They point out that the United Nations Development Programme named economic growth as a necessary but not sufficient condition for poverty elimination. The Thai case is a perfect example. Although women make up half of Thailand's labour force, they have been incorporated in gendered roles in order to drive profits, such that "[t]he biggest revenue-earning establishments in Thailand...rely largely on poorly educated and low-skilled women workers" (Suriyasarn & Resurreccion, 2003, p. 27).*

Between 1980 and 1993, the annual growth of Thai exports was 15.5 percent on average, according to World Bank statistics (Karnjanauksorn & Voravidh, 1998). The share of trade in the country's GDP went from 43.6 percent in 1986, to 65.5 percent in 1989, to 89.4 percent in 1996. However, only 13 percent of the workforce during the mid-1990s was in manufacturing in the formal sector (Behrman & Tinakorn, 2000).

This means that the growth was produced largely by women export zones workers and women working as home-workers in the informal economy (Karnjanauksorn & Voravidh, 1998). Almost 70 percent of non-agricultural workers are part of the informal economy (Chamsanit, 1994), and upwards of two-thirds of them are women (Asian Productivity Organization, 2002; Thonguthai, 2002).

### The Urban-Migrant Workforce

Through the boom of 1985–96, an estimated 2 million seasonal migrants moved in and out of Bangkok, and up to 50 percent of the country's urban population was located in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area (BMA) (Dixon, 1999). A gap between higher urban incomes and lower rural incomes fueled migration to escape poverty (Hewison, 2001). New roles in the capitalist, industrial labour market meant that young, single women, many in their late teens, travelled to Bangkok independent of their families to find work (Thonguthai, 2002). Many women from agricultural families, who work for no pay at home, were happy to receive an income even if it meant taking a low-paying job (Thonguthai, 2002).

Although female industrial workers in Thailand experience more socio-economic independence, they do so in a gender-biased labour market that favours single young women for certain types of jobs. Women who work in factories typically have to stay year-round to retain employment. This pattern is documented globally and regionally, and is explained away by some Thais who hold on to the

cultural perception that with good comes bad. Hence distance travelled and perilous working conditions in industry are accepted consequences to access incomes (Thonguthai, 2002, p. 70). The Western assumption historically encouraged by the World Bank and multinational corporations (MNCs) that migrants' exposure to capitalist labour market brings security is false (Razavi, 1999). The reality is that women workers "simultaneously experience socio-economic empowerment and exploitation" (Clausen, 2002).

Internal migrant workers are a result of regional imbalances created by national development policy. Migrants move to the BMA because they can not find adequate jobs or incomes in the rural areas. The agricultural sector had been neglected partly because the price of rice was kept low to prevent wages in the industrial sector from rising (Karnjanauksorn & Voravidh, 1998). Many claim that the Thai economy was designed to extract surplus from rural agricultural areas to sustain urban industrial development. Since the 1980s, 75 percent of all investment have been concentrated in Bangkok and its vicinity (Clausen, 2002).

### Export Sector Workforce

In spite of the fact that foreign corporations in the export sector frequently do not have to pay tax or infrastructure costs, cost-cutting remains central to their operations because of intense global competition. Cutting costs by externalising production fuels demand for informalised and casualised labour. Informalisation is subcontracted

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work performed in the informal economy, or work with no contracts in the informal economy. Casualisation refers to work performed by people without permanent contracts or unions, usually on renewable, short-term contracts with low wages and no rights or benefits.

Poor working conditions in export industries are well-documented. For example, several women labourers died within a short time frame in the mid-1990s in different manufacturing plants. The government listed the cause of their death as AIDS, but the press later revealed that it was actually a fatal buildup of work-related chemical toxins in their bodies (Bello et al., 1998). In 1993, the Kader factory fire killed 188 people, 159 of whom were women, who were locked up inside the building for anti-theft measures. It is not surprising, then, that by the time government began to address

occupational safety and health issues, certain industries already had a reputation for their low wages, long working hours, strict managerial control, feminisation of the workforce, casualisation of the workforce, and health and safety concerns (Brown, 2001).

### **Informal Sector Workforce**

Home-work conditions are equally poor... Women have absolutely no negotiating power over wages or terms of employment with factories so they have to accept what is on offer. Because there is no contractual enforcement they are sometimes cheated or never paid (Thonguthai, 2002). In flower-making, about 80 percent of subcontractors' wages are set by the factory. In garment-making, about half of the wages are set by the factory (HomeNet Thailand,

2002). Home-work often entails longer than normal working hours, repetitive motion, and pressure to meet inflexible deadlines. Also, the majority of home-work is unskilled labour (HomeNet Thailand, 2002). Eighty-one percent of garment and 75 percent of flower home-workers completed primary school. In contrast, 17 and 11 percent of garment and flower workers respectively had finished vocational school, while none finished college (HomeNet Thailand, 2002).

HomeNet Thailand says the problem with international development policies' assumptions about informal economy work is that these are based on neo-classical, early 19<sup>th</sup> century economic development models of small entrepreneurs. "Competition took much more the form of competition among equals and markets were more stable, local, and predictable. The situation of informal economy workers in contemporary developing countries [like] Thailand, especially those who find themselves in declining labour-intensive industries, is entirely different, and needs to be recognised as such" (HomeNet Thailand, 2002, p. 121).

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### **Thaksin's Labor Laws**

Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party have consistently promoted economics over labor rights, in spite of claims to invigorate the domestic, grassroots economy as well as find linkages with the world economy to promote "sustainable, quality-oriented growth and economic stability" (Brown & Hewison, 2004, citing the TRT). After passing the Labour Protection Act in 1998, which was meant to update a comprehensive labour law from 1975, the TRT began to reduce their labour initiatives and deleted proposals to ratify ILO conventions and introduce unemployment insurance (Brown & Hewison, 2004). The handful of essential labour laws currently favours the wealthy and elite more than they do the working poor (Yoshida, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

Thailand's capitalist development has systematically devalued women and women's labour. In the Thai context this is of crucial importance because women are responsible for household budgets and meeting the family's financial needs (Karnjanauksorn & Voravidh, 1998). This is harder to do when they receive less pay for their work than do men and work under dangerous and precarious conditions, including working away from home.

Since the 1980s, the developed world has sustained efforts to involve women in neo-liberal economic development through increased labour market opportunities for women, which would in turn improve women's status through increased economic power. Razavi

(1999), however, refutes the World Bank's contention that liberalised trade leads to wage employment growth, real wage increases, and massive poverty reduction. She argues that simply allowing women access to jobs and rising wages does not automatically lead to women's empowerment, nor does it justify the wage and occupational segregation that has characterised growth

in East and South East Asia (Razavi, 1999). The case of Thai women workers is certainly one more case that illustrates the truth of such claims. ■

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