

**“The Defiance of a Flower:” Women’s Participation in Thailand’s  
Movement for Democracy (1973-1976)**

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Woman has two hands  
To seize tight the essence of life  
The twisted sinews are torn by work  
Not by preening with glittering silks.

Woman has two feet  
To climb toward her dreams,  
To stand together, firm  
Not to feed from the labour of others.

Woman has eyes  
To search for a new life  
To look far across the earth  
Not to cast amorous glances in flirtation.

Woman a heart,  
A constant flame  
Building force, creating a mass,  
For she, she is a person.

Woman has a life  
To wipe away the traces of wrong with reason  
She has value as a free person  
Not as a servant of lust.

A flower has sharp thorns  
Not bursting into bloom for an admirer  
She blossoms to raise  
The glory of the earth.

- "The Defiance of a Flower," Chiranan Pitpreecha

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## Thai Language Conventions

There is no universally accepted system for the transliteration of Thai words, so spellings in the following paper may differ from other texts.<sup>1</sup> Generally, Thai proper nouns in this thesis are written using the Roman alphabet based on their most common spelling in source materials or according to the preferred spelling of a particular individual or organization. When a particular Thai phrase or term is referenced, I include both an English translation and a phonetic transcription rather than the word written in Thai script.<sup>2</sup>

It is convention in Thailand for individuals to be referred to by their first name. Accordingly, Thai historical figures and scholars of secondary source materials will be referred to by their given name rather than their family name. The bibliography is organized alphabetically by the given names of Thai authors and the surnames of non-Thai authors. Readers should also note that the geographic polity that corresponds with modern Thailand is described as Siam prior to June 1939, at which time the state officially adopted the name Thailand.

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<sup>1</sup> This project challenged me in formative ways, reminding me of the limits of dominant interpretive frameworks and my own knowledge. Although I have done my best to survey available primary and secondary source materials, my lack of Thai language skills has constrained the interventions that I am able to make in this area of historical research. It is important for me to acknowledge that there is a breadth of scholarship that I do not touch upon because of my linguistic limitations and my inability to access non-digitized records from the National Archives of Thailand in the time allocated for this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Here I follow the approach adopted by historians Thongchai Winichakul and Kanokrat Lertchoosakul. See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), xiii and Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, *The Rise of the Octobrists in Contemporary Thailand: Power and Conflict among Former Left-Wing Student Activists in Thai Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2016), xx.

## I. Introduction

On October 14th, 1973, as many as 500,000 people gathered in the streets of Bangkok in the largest outpouring of political indignation in Thailand's history. The demonstrations that led up to this event began on behalf of thirteen university students and faculty members who were imprisoned by the authoritarian government because of their advocacy for a new constitution. Even after the state succumbed to public pressure and released the thirteen detainees, the crowds continued to occupy central Bangkok and moved towards the palace to consult with the Thai king, Bhumibol Adulyadej.<sup>3</sup> The students began to peacefully disperse after meeting with King Bhumibol, but were attacked by military and police forces who used tanks, guns, and batons against the demonstrators. Instead of backing down in the face of violent suppression, the public rallied to the students' side. As they gathered on the streets of Bangkok, protesters refused to settle for anything less than democratic government reform and the removal of the "Three Tyrants," who held a firm grip over the military-aligned government. By the evening of October 14th, the cabinet of General Thanom Kittikachorn had stepped down. On October 15th it was announced that Thanom had fled the country along with the other tyrants, Thanom's son, Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, and his close political ally, Field Marshall Praphas Charusathien. Against all odds, the popular uprising resulted in the expulsion of the Three Tyrants and the installation of a new civilian cabinet, which was tasked with presiding over the formation of a representative government.

Democratic politics flourished in Thailand for nearly three years after the Three Tyrants were overthrown. Under the new constitution, promulgated in 1974, gender equality was formally recognized for the first time, freedom of speech was protected, protests against

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<sup>3</sup> Brewster Grace, "A Note on Thailand: The Student Rebellion and Political Change," *American Universities Field Staff Series* 22, no. 4 (1974): 1-9, <http://www.icwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BG-3.pdf>.

unpopular policies multiplied, and economic reforms were introduced. The liberties protected by the democratic government were quite new for the majority of people in Thailand, who were previously excluded from the political process. Although participatory politics were often disorganized or disruptive, there was a widespread sense of possibility, particularly among non-elites, during the democratic period. This optimism was shattered on October 6th, 1976, when paramilitary and state police forces descended on Thammasat University. In the early morning hours of October 6th, armed militants unleashed a campaign of shocking violence against students who had taken shelter on Thammasat's campus while protesting the return of Thanom, the very dictator they had fought to overthrow in 1973. An opportunistic military coup rode the coattails of the attack on Thammasat and forced the elected prime minister, Seni Pramoj, to resign by the evening of October 6th. Before the sun rose on October 7th, Thailand's democratic experiment had come to a bloody conclusion. Amid the ruins of a once budding progressive movement, Thai and international observers alike were left with more questions than answers, namely: What, if anything, did this fleeting period of popular participation, increased socioeconomic support, and open political discourse mean for the larger arch of Thai history?

For many years following the brutal suppression of the student movement on October 6, 1976, academics, officials, and ordinary people in Thailand did not dare ask this question. The popular uprising of 1973 was seen by many Western historians as a brief departure from Thailand's tradition of constitutional monarchy and conservative military governance. In Thailand itself, the trauma of the 1976 massacre and the brutal anti-left crackdown that followed in its wake shrouded this era of democratic reform in silence. In the immediate aftermath of the October 6th massacre, which restored the power of a military-aligned government, academia, independent journalism, and left-wing political thought were highly restricted. Ideas and speech

deemed communist in nature or disrespectful to the government were suppressed under new authoritarian press codes and counter-insurgency laws.<sup>4</sup> Later, as restrictions loosened and the “Octobrist generation” returned to positions of prominence in Thai society, a culture of silence continued to envelop the memory of 1976 and the student movement as a whole. An emphasis on national reconciliation and a policy of ‘forgiving and forgetting’ were used to justify collective silence. When the events of the 1970s were discussed, memories of the student movement remained colored by propaganda and hyper-royalist or nationalist biases. It wasn’t until 1996, when the anniversary of October 6th was commemorated for the first time, that limited conversations about the popular uprising first occurred in public settings.<sup>5</sup>

As personal narratives and revisionist histories began to puncture the culture of silence around the events of 1973-1976, one key group of activists remained an afterthought in discussions about the democratic period. Although women played a significant role in the political movements of the 1960s and 70s as members of student leadership, scholars, protest participants, and defectors to the Communist Party of Thailand, the contributions of these female actors are often nothing more than a footnote in the history of this era. In the most well-known accounts of the democratic period, written by former student activists such as historian Thongchai Winichakul and Seksan Prasertkul, women are not entirely absent from the narrative, but they are not studied as an entity distinct from men. Since the 1990s, the subject of women’s rights has gained traction in Thailand and young women are at the forefront of today’s advocacy for democratic reform. Yet, women remain grossly underrepresented in Thai electoral politics and the lens of gender studies, an emerging field in Thailand, has not been broadly applied to the

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<sup>4</sup> David A. Andelman, “Coup Driving Leftist Leaders in Thailand Into Hiding,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/10/archives/coup-driving-leftist-leaders-in-thailand-into-hiding.html>; U.S. Congress, Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations, *Human Rights in Thailand*, 95th Cong., 1st sess., 1977, <https://doct6.com/archives/13865>.

<sup>5</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020).



country's history.<sup>6</sup> To date, a comprehensive study of women's contributions during the democratic period has not been conducted in Thai or English.<sup>7</sup>

Though this thesis views many of the political and legal initiatives in 1970s Thailand as the foundation of a budding women's liberation movement, which also had its roots in earlier twentieth century advocacy, it does not conclude that women were a cohesive or self-conscious entity at the time. Many of the politically active women who are discussed in the coming pages would not have differentiated themselves from their male peers or imagined themselves as feminists in the way we might assume today. In writing this account, the author does not attempt to impose contemporary approaches to politics and gender onto the past. The following historical analysis is grounded in the principles of subaltern studies and the belief that in order to fully understand the 1973-1976 period, it is necessary to acknowledge the women who participated in Thailand's democratic experiment as a group with their own grievances, political goals, and experiences with state-sanctioned suppression. By drawing from the stories of individual women, where possible, this thesis aims to center the agency of ordinary people who may otherwise be at the margins of our history books.

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<sup>6</sup> By referring to gender studies as an emerging field in Thailand I do not mean to discredit the work produced by institutions such as the Chiangmai University Women's Studies Center, established in 1986. My intention here is to indicate that gender as a frame of analysis has not been fully adopted by academia and the general public in regards to Thai history. For more information regarding the participation of women in electoral politics see Suteera Thomson and Maytinee Bhongsvej, "Putting Women's Concerns on the Political Agenda," (Bangkok: Gender and Development Research Institute, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Tamara Loos (Professor of History, Southeast Asian Studies, and Gender and Sexuality at Cornell University) in conversation with the author, January 30, 2023.

## II. A Brief History of the Gendered Thai Geo-Body

*Phu-chai pen chang thao na,  
phu-ying pen chang thao lang.*

Men are the front legs of the elephant,  
and women are the hind legs of the elephant.

### Understanding “Thainess”

To understand the political and social climate in which women were operating during the 1970s, it is necessary to explore various conceptions of “Thainess,” or Thai national identity. When the nation-state emerged as a unit of political organization in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, leaders of these new polities developed theoretical frameworks that positioned their subjects as members of a homogenous whole. Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation as an “imagined community” explains how individuals who may never meet and who have few shared characteristics can perceive themselves as belonging to a larger sovereign entity.<sup>8</sup> Over time, Anderson posits, intellectual indoctrination and repeated appeals to unity within a particular territorial area allow the nation state to become a seemingly natural source of common identity.

In the case of Siam, the nation state displaced indigenous models of the pre-modern kingdom, which included ambiguous boundaries and zones of multiple sovereignty in a hierarchical tribute system.<sup>9</sup> Under the reigns of King Mongkut (1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), Siam adopted the “modern” conception of the *chat* (nation) as a geo-body, a term coined by historian Thongchai Winichakul in reference to a clearly defined territorial unit over

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, “Sovereignty” in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 81-94.

which a single authority exercises sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> The primary authorities in the Siamese model were the king and a Bangkok-centered bureaucracy populated by lesser royals and the nobility. Buddhism was another key pillar upon which the edifice of the Siamese nation was built. Notions of Buddhist morality, which positioned status as a product of merit, legitimated the royal family's authority and justified social or economic hierarchies. According to this understanding of the *chat*, buttressed by religion and royalty, Thai elites in the late nineteenth century began to consolidate Siam as “a community of people who shared a cultural commonality particularly defined by being the subjects of the same monarch.”<sup>11</sup>

Once Siamese elites assumed the project of building a nation state, they faced the challenge of promoting a unified culture across a territorial area that included diverse ethnic groups, regional climates, languages, and religious beliefs. Siam's monarchs began to consolidate their power and inculcate a shared Siamese identity through public works and “modernization” policies. Bangkok's role as the seat of power in Siam grew rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as members of the monarchy and its administrative bureaucracy began to exert direct control over provinces that were previously linked to the metropole by tribute or name alone.<sup>12</sup> Development initiatives, standardized educational curricula, and military force allowed the Bangkok elite to foster a sense of belonging to a unified Siamese polity among their constituents. At a time when making Siam, and later Thailand, appear *siwilai* (civilized) to the European powers was seen as a mechanism for defending against colonialism, these efforts to create a shared consciousness often promoted Western values, customs, and knowledge as benchmarks for the ideal Siamese citizen.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 111.

<sup>11</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 134-5.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to development or modernization initiatives, the monarchy and urban elites often used mapping to construct the Siamese geo-body and exert direct control over contested provincial territories. See Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 147.

In the 20th century, political leaders accelerated the project of state-building and contested Westernization with their own articulations of “traditional” Siamese values. Under the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), who is remembered as the founder of modern Thai nationalism,<sup>14</sup> Siam began to reject blind adherence to Western models of state-building. Vajiravudh’s program of nationalism elevated Siamese history and culture with the goal of resisting Western encroachment.<sup>15</sup> Nationalism and turn-of-the century modernization campaigns were mutually reinforcing, as expanded communication, transportation, and educational systems extended the government’s influence over the minds of its citizens. Ownership over state-building shifted slightly in 1932, when the People’s Party (*Khana Ratsadorn*) orchestrated a bloodless coup in order to limit the power of the king. Following Thailand's transformation from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, the “modern” values of liberty and democracy were nominally reconciled with older tenets of Thai nationalism, such as reverence for the monarchy. While the king remained the official head of state, his political power was diluted by the constitution and the introduction of a National Assembly.

Under the administration of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram (Pibul) in the late 1930s to 1950s, the government embarked on “a campaign to foster a true ‘Thai Culture.’”<sup>16</sup> Pibul’s nationalist agenda included dictating and enforcing standards of dress, language, diet, and behavioral norms such as being “kind and helpful to the young, the elderly, and the sick.”<sup>17</sup> The adoption of the name “Thailand,” or “land of the free,” in 1949 signaled to the international community the arrival of Thailand as a full-fledged “modern” nation. Though the project of

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<sup>14</sup> Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo!: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1978, ix.

<sup>15</sup> Vella, “The Past as a Model,” in *Chaiyo!: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*.

<sup>16</sup> Thamsook Numnonda, “Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-1945,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, No. 2 (Sep. 1978), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20062726>, 234.

<sup>17</sup> Thamsook, “Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-1945,” 236.

state-building was not yet complete, Thailand's status as a geographically, culturally, and historically determined entity had been firmly established.

By the time that King Bhumibol, Thailand's longest reigning monarch, acceded to the throne in 1946, the Thai polity was profoundly different from the Siamese geo-body. In twentieth century Thailand, people living within the state's borders widely accepted the premise of a common, long-standing Thai identity, known as *khwampenthai* or Thainess.<sup>18</sup> Yet, even though Thainess was supposed to be implicitly understood by the public, a clearcut definition of *khwampenthai* remained elusive. As previously demonstrated, succeeding monarchical, military, and, later, legislative regimes developed their own conceptions of *khwampenthai*, adapted to suit both personal interests and the priorities of the time. It was easier for cultural, religious, and political authorities to define what was *un-Thai* than it was to identify universal characteristics of Thainess. Thus, national identity was most clearly expressed through what historian Thongchai Winichakul refers to as “negative identification.” According to Thongchai, *khwampenthai* emerged primarily in contradistinction to the “other” whether that be the *farang* (Westerner), *khaek* (person of Muslim, South Asian, or Middle Eastern identity), or another group perceived as inherently “un-Thai.”<sup>19</sup>

During and prior to the Cold War period, Thailand's royalist and right-wing governments situated democratic, leftist ideology as antithetical to the core values of the nation and therefore innately “un-Thai.” Thai leaders took pride in the fact that the nation had never technically been colonized by Europeans, and saw compliance with centralized authorities in Bangkok as responsible for Thailand's independence. The government reinforced the idea that stability, order, and security were national priorities dependent on the people's quiet submission to the

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<sup>18</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, 5-6.

institutions of the nation, religion, and monarchy. Rebellion and dissent, which the state claimed contributed to *woon wai*, or a state of nuisance, instability, and even anarchy, were condemned as un-Thai behavior because they upset peace and order in society.<sup>20</sup> Thus, unlike in other Southeast Asian countries, where left-wing revolutionaries often became national heroes in their fights against colonial powers, the Thai polity did not celebrate non-conformists and, “until 1973, it would be hard to imagine a single Thai children’s hero who had ever been inside a prison.”<sup>21</sup> Though progressive activists began to grow in number with the proliferation of higher education in the mid-twentieth century, they remained outside of the mainstream media and discourse, which were dominated by conservative factions linked to the military or royal family. Departing from state-sanctioned norms, leftist intellectuals, political activists, and women who broke gendered expectations were “anxious to defend [their] nationalist credentials against charges of being ‘Chinese,’ ‘Vietnamese,’ ‘un-Thai,’ and ‘anti-monarchy’”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in rebelling against the right-wing regime during the October 14, 1973 uprising, activists were not only resisting the ‘Three Tyrants’ and their allies, they were also confronting a nationally legible interpretation of *kwampenthai* that was aligned with royalism, a rigid class system, and strict social norms.

### **Constructing Gender Relations as a Pillar of National Identity**

Qualities associated with *kwampenthai* and the ideal Thai citizen were differentiated on the basis of gender.<sup>23</sup> The expectations for women’s conduct in the public and private spheres were distinct from those for men, as captured in the proverb, “*Phu-chai pen chang thao na*,

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<sup>20</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschalger, Gunn & Hein, 1981), 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> Kaisan Tejapira, “De-Othering Jek Communists: Rewriting Thai History from the Viewpoint of Ethno-Ideological Other,” in *Southeast Asia over Three Generations: Essays Presented to Benedict R. O’G. Anderson*, edited by James T. Siegel and Audrey R. Kahin, (Cornell University Press, 2003), 245.

<sup>22</sup> Kaisan, “De-Othering Jek Communists: Rewriting Thai History from the Viewpoint of Ethno-Ideological Other,” 246.

<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately exploring gender and sexuality in a comprehensive manner is beyond the scope of this paper, which often follows the historical record’s tendency to assume a gender binary. The author regrets that this thesis could not better reflect the complexity of gender identity and would like to emphasize the need for future research in this area.

*phu-ying pen chang thao lang.*” As the hind legs of the elephant, the ideal Thai woman was a follower who supported the state and the family while submitting to the leadership of men.<sup>24</sup> In all but the wealthiest families, Thai women were obligated to contribute to both domestic labor (including child-rearing and household chores) and economic production. During the Early Bangkok period, ruling class women were seen as privileged because they only needed to perform domestic labor while working class women continued to shoulder both productive and reproductive responsibilities without receiving social recognition for the burdens they carried.

Women’s work was not valued to the extent of men’s labor, which was seen as “essential to the state as well as society” and rewarded in family law provisions that elevated men to the head of household.<sup>25</sup> While members of the male workforce, especially soldiers and farmers, were seen as central to the prosperity and longevity of the state, women were valued solely for their reproductive and child-rearing abilities. Domestic roles, though critical to raising the next generation of Thai citizens, were dismissed as secondary to men’s public-facing functions. Women were excluded from positions such as politics or law, which were seen as linked primarily to the state, not the family, and were thus the domain of men. The gendered division of labor, wherein women shouldered the responsibility for child-rearing, home-making, and economic production to support the religious or political activities of their husbands, underlied the social fabric of the Thai nation state. As literary critics Kanchana and Todsapon argue, even though women’s work and feminine qualities were not adequately respected in Thai society, the labor that women performed in compliance with traditional gender norms was essential to ensuring the smooth operation of everyday life.

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<sup>24</sup> Kanchana Witchayapakorn and Todsapon Suranakkharin, “Dignity in Humility: The Representation of Central Female Characters in Thai Literary Works,” *Naresuan University Journal of Humanities*, Vol.14, no. 1 (January-April 2017), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Suwadee T. Patana, “Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective,” in *Women’s Studies in Thailand: Power, Knowledge, and Justice*, edited by Suwanna Satha-anand, (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2005), 101.

According to traditional conventions the *kulasatri*, or virtuous woman, fulfilled her duties as mother, wife, and worker with humility, obedience, and tenderness. The gender-code placed serious constraints on the *kulasatri*, who must “remain conservative in her sexuality, provide for the well-being of her family, and work longer and harder than her husband.”<sup>26</sup> Standards for gendered conduct were constructed and articulated through political, religious, and cultural avenues. In literature, plays, and popular culture, women who acted in accordance with the gender code by faithfully serving their husbands or behaving in an agreeable, “ladylike” fashion were rewarded with positive outcomes. Though women’s morality, which was preconditioned on conduct, was highly regulated, women were seen as incapable of attaining the highest levels of merit to which men could aspire. This was because women could not enter monastic institutions (including monastery schools which were often the sole forms of education in rural areas prior to the twentieth century) or be ordained as monks. The lesser religious rank of *mae chi* was the most prestigious position available to women, but even *mae chi* “had nothing...to do with Buddhist ceremonies and were neither honored nor respected.”<sup>27</sup>

Female sexuality was portrayed in spiritual and literary texts, such as the *Traiphum lok winitchai*, as the antithesis of male enlightenment and purity. In many of these texts, women were inherently suspect as “lower beings who were tied to the material, illusory world” and would tempt men to become “slaves of desire.”<sup>28</sup> Because a person’s status in a predominantly Buddhist society like Early Bangkok Period Thailand was fixed to their merit, women’s lives were not afforded as much value as men’s. On the occasion of the birth of a daughter, a familiar saying was the passive, if not disheartened, phrase “*di mueankan*” (that’s alright), which implied

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<sup>26</sup> Kanchana and Todsapon, “Dignity in Humility: The Representation of Central Female Characters in Thai Literary Works,” 2.

<sup>27</sup> Patana, “Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective,” 110.

<sup>28</sup> Patana, “Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective,” 108.



that the family would have preferred a son.<sup>29</sup> These social and religious attitudes towards women were reinforced in the realm of law and governance. For example, until the twentieth century, women in Thailand were legally considered the property of their fathers or husbands and were required to ask for male consent before making important decisions regarding property.<sup>30</sup>

By at least the 1940s, there were indications that the traditional approach to gender relations was no longer the only model available to Thai women. Popular media in the twentieth century began to put forward an image of the “modern woman” (a category that was typically reserved for the middle and upper-classes) who was educated, fashionable, and self-sufficient.<sup>31</sup> Publications like *Kunlasatri* (Sophisticated Lady) began to take up “middle-class proto-feminist concerns” like education, polygamy, or prostitution, while offering their readers beauty tips and advice for completing domestic chores. Though somewhat departing from earlier depictions of the *kulasatri* and affording female readers greater agency, these publications “played a ritual role in reinforcing existing forms of nationalism,” reshaping rather than eliminating gendered expectations for Thai citizens.<sup>32</sup> Other representations of the modern Thai woman could be found in books like *Huang rak haew luk*, a novel published in 1949 by author Luang Wichit. *Huang rak haew luk* broke new ground, employing a cast of “common and lower-class women” who offered a “new, exciting and international model of the modern militant Thai women.”<sup>33</sup> The novel’s heroine, Praphimphan, walks the line between traditional and modern expectations, questioning the “traditional self-identity that is tied to the family and to the male.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, in the end,

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<sup>29</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018, 132.

<sup>30</sup> Suteera Thomson and Maytinee Bhongsvej, “Women Reshaping the Society: A Challenge for the Remaining Decade,” Gender and Development Research Institute (April 1995), 1. For a more in depth conversation about laws affecting women’s status and rights see Chapter IV.

<sup>31</sup> Patana, “Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective,” 120.

<sup>32</sup> Darunee Tantiwiranond, “Changing Gender Relations in Thailand: A Historical and Cultural Analysis,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* Vol. 4, no. 2 (1997): 167–198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152159700400203>, 178.

<sup>33</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Thak, *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature*, 125-126.

Pramphimphan's story continues to uphold assumptions that women "are not rational beings but emotional ones."<sup>35</sup>

The expansion of higher education as part of the government development agenda in the 1930s benefitted women as well as men, increasing female enrollment and allowing women to access more post-graduation opportunities.<sup>36</sup> Women were able to make some forays into gradually feminized professional occupations as nurses, teachers, and dress-makers. These jobs were seen as socially acceptable because they could be construed as "widening the scope of women's domestic roles" and because they did not place women in direct competition with men.<sup>37</sup> In spite of women's progress in educational and economic spheres under the modernization agenda, their political victories were meager. Thailand became one of the first countries in Southeast Asia to grant women the right to vote when the Constitutional Revolution of 1932 granted universal suffrage to citizens. Yet, in terms of political advocacy for a wider scope of women's rights, the fledgling movements that did occur during and prior to the 1960s were mostly limited to the interests of elite women, focused on family law reforms or restricting a husband's infidelity in polygamous relationships. When campaigns led by elite women during the early twentieth century did result in "token achievements," these superficial victories tended to "diffuse female consciousness about the root causes of gender and class inequality."<sup>38</sup>

Obstacles like the "old-boy ties" at the core of patron-client relationships in government, law, and politics continued to go unaddressed, preventing women from breaking the glass ceiling.<sup>39</sup>

During the 1973-1976 democratic period, politically active women began to explicitly challenge the gender norms at the foundation of traditional Thai nationalism. Contrary to the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Meredith Weiss, *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness*, Minnesota University Press, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," 121.

<sup>38</sup> Darunee, "Changing Gender Relations in Thailand: A Historical and Cultural Analysis," 185.

<sup>39</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 31-32.

claim that the “women’s movement was more or less born out of the democratization movement,” women did not only benefit from the break in political norms during the revolutionary years of the 1970s, they actively worked to facilitate this break and to create space for women’s rights to free speech, equal pay, and political participation.<sup>40</sup> As they marched in the streets or organized boycotts, making themselves visible and elevating their voices, these women broke the “gendered social contract” and defied “notions of appropriate femininity and propriety.”<sup>41</sup>

Female activists in the early 1970s found that as society openly questioned the status quo in relation to class, the military, and the monarchy, the public was more amenable to reevaluating gender norms, as well. Many of these women, students and labor organizers alike, were able to “put gender rights on the agenda” and in the Constitution of 1974 itself.<sup>42</sup> Even though the Constitution of 1974 was abrogated two years after it came into effect, gender equality under the law enabled women to participate in previously off-limits occupations in politics and the development sector.<sup>43</sup> Public protest, labor organizing, and advocacy in the realm of law and politics allowed women to pull a seat up to the decision-making table, even if they were not yet empowered to act on their interests in a meaningful way. It is important to note, however, that the 1970s were not entirely a rupture in terms of women’s rights advocacy. Although the 70s were a watershed moment for reconceptualizing women’s participation in the public sphere, politics, and the law, this period was preceded by decades of advocacy by men and women who did not lay claim to feminist credentials, but advanced the cause of gender equality nonetheless.

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<sup>40</sup> Virada Somswasdi, “The Women’s Movement and Legal Reform in Thailand” *Cornell Law School Berger International Speaker Papers*, Paper 1 (2003), [http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/biss\\_papers/1](http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/biss_papers/1), 2.

<sup>41</sup> Sudarat Musikawong, “Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence,” *Meridians* Vol. 11, no. 2 (2011): 174–204, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.174>, 175.

<sup>42</sup> See Sirin Muncharoen and Jasmine Chia, “The Struggle for Democracy and Women’s Rights are One and the Same,” Bangkok: *The Thai Enquirer*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/9686/womenandthailand/>.

<sup>43</sup> Darunee, “The Growth and Challenges of Women’s Studies in Thailand.”

### III. Women's Participation in Politics & Protest

#### Expanding Educational Access: Students Become the Vanguard of Social Change

In the years leading up to the popular uprising of 1973, the expansion of higher education laid the groundwork for increased, and more effective, political action among previously disenfranchised groups. During the pre-modern era, education at all levels was a privilege enjoyed almost exclusively by male elites. Instruction at the local *wat* (temple) was often the only option available to low and middle-income children from rural communities.<sup>44</sup> Because women were excluded from monastic rites, seen as corrupting influences that should not interfere with the purity of religious spaces, they were not permitted to study at the *wat* and thus could not access formal educational opportunities. While women received some education at home or, in wealthy families from private tutors, their lessons were geared towards feminine endeavors like etiquette, child-rearing, and domestic responsibilities.<sup>45</sup> As a result, women were not taught the requisite skills to participate in the male-dominated world of politics.

Education became a pillar of Siam's development agenda in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, viewed as an effective tool for inculcating national identity and training the elites who would lead a "New Siam." A standardized curriculum overseen by the Ministry of Education was introduced on a national level in 1889, but it wasn't until 1921 that state-sponsored education became a requirement for women as well as men.<sup>46</sup> Education was intended to equip women for their new roles as citizens of a modern nation state as well as feminized professions such as nursing, manufacturing, and teaching.<sup>47</sup> At the level of tertiary education, the state was primarily concerned with training bureaucrats, the vast majority of

<sup>44</sup> LeeRay Costa, "Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 1-21,

<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e6b89326-825b-4852-b725-da2e0fbfcc/content>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Costa, "Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand," 5.

<sup>47</sup> Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," 120.

whom were men, to work in the civil service.<sup>48</sup> Thailand's earliest tertiary education program at the University of Chulalongkorn (established in 1917) was incredibly small, graduating about one hundred students a year and catering almost exclusively to the Bangkok urban elite. When Thammasat University was founded in 1934 as a product of the 1932 Constitutional Revolution, its mission was distinct from that of Chulalongkorn. Yet, although Thammasat aimed to be more inclusive and to produce democratic-minded leaders aligned with the new constitutional regime, much like Chulalongkorn its first students were mostly male Bangkok residents.<sup>49</sup> As Thailand's modernization agenda accelerated in the 1930s and subsequent decades, the government began to invest heavily in education. By the 1930s, the national education system had become entrenched in the provinces, with improved opportunities for both rural and urban students. Between 1961 and 1972, more than 30% of funds in the national development plans were dedicated to education. Government investments in education succeeded in increasing educational attainment at the highest levels: The number of university students in Thailand multiplied by more than a factor of five in the same period, from approximately 18,000 students in 1961 to more than 100,000 in 1972.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike earlier advancements in higher education, the growth of university programs from the 1940s-50s onward benefitted previously marginalized populations, in addition to elites. Women and low-income students made up a growing proportion of the university and general student population. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the gender parity rate for primary and secondary schools was 0.87 in 1971 and 0.8 for tertiary education in 1977,

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<sup>48</sup> LeeRay Costa, "Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 1-21,

<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e6b89326-825b-4852-b725-da2e2e0fbfcc/content>.

<sup>49</sup> Prajak Kongkirati, "Thailand The Cultural Politics of Student Resistance," in Meredith Weiss ed., *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness*, Minnesota University Press, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> George Katsiaficas, *Asia's Unknown Uprisings Volume 2: People Power in the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1947-2009*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013, 293.

indicating a substantial increase in the enrollment of female students throughout the twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> Anthropologist LeeRay Costa writes that, by the late 1930s, educating women became a strategic component of the Thai government's development agenda.<sup>52</sup> Boasting that women in Thailand were highly educated and model citizens of the Thai geo-body was one means for the nation to prove its status as a modern state to the West. Women also began to represent a greater proportion of faculty members at Thai universities, with a ratio of 49 to 51 at Ramkhamhaeng University in 1973. Yet, in an educational assessment of Ramkhamhaeng, it is evident that resistance to women's participation in higher education remained strong in the 1970s. In this assessment, the authors warned that a higher ratio of women in university faculties would cause "the University intellectual life...to be sacrificed" because married women in Thai society "have to be in charge of all the details of the family affairs and have very little time left for professional work."<sup>53</sup> The same report, which is also critical of student political activism, insists that "no Thai lady is likely to prefer self-actualization to family coherence," hinting that women's educational pursuits continued to be perceived as a hiatus prior to the inevitable goal of marriage.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, the Thai government saw expanding higher education, including teaching and technical programs, to non-elite students as a priority of its development agenda. With more low-income students being educated in Bangkok and regional cities, Thailand could ward off accusations that its rural population was 'backwards,' isolated from the fruits of urban modernity, Westernization, and constitutional monarchy. In an effort to facilitate higher education for students from outside of Bangkok, the state emphasized regional development

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<sup>51</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), "School Enrollment, Tertiary (Gross), Gender Parity Index (GPI) - Thailand," Accessed October 24, 2022 at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.TERT.FM.ZS?locations=TH-XU-US>; UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), "School Enrollment, Primary and Secondary (Gross), Gender Parity Index (GPI) - Thailand," Accessed October 24, 2022 at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS?locations=TH>.

<sup>52</sup> Costa, "Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand."

<sup>53</sup> Amnuay Tapingkae ed., "The Growth of Southeast Asian Universities: Expansion Versus Consolidation," University of Singapore: Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (April 1974): <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED101631.pdf>, 154.

<sup>54</sup> Costa, "Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand."

throughout the 1960s, beginning with the opening of Chiang Mai University in 1961. Over the next decade, the number of universities in Thailand grew from five to seventeen, including technical schools and teachers colleges. A new open university system was also introduced during this time, greatly increasing the quantity and diversity of undergraduate students. Open universities like Ramkhamhaeng (founded in 1971) enrolled as many as several hundred thousand students as part of a national five year higher education plan which sought to “make a college education available to all those who had met the minimum requirements” of receiving a high school diploma.<sup>55</sup> The populations of these new open and regional schools were “highly heterogeneous with a variety of social and cultural differences” and they reflected a variety of political ideologies.<sup>56</sup> At times these institutions were stigmatized as “unruly” or lower quality owing to their admissions standards and large class sizes, but they were overall successful at supporting their students’ academic growth. By the time of the popular uprising in 1973, low-income rural students and women were attending and graduating from universities at unprecedented rates.

### **Mobilizing the People in the Popular Uprising of 1973**

The growth of higher education in Thailand resulted in a political shift, with students emerging as a powerful new voice of the people. As Meredith Weiss et al. demonstrate in their study of Southeast Asian student activism, university attendees became “the vanguard of social movements” in the years following World War II.<sup>57</sup> As the Thai government implemented its developmentalist ideology and nationalist ambitions in the early modern period, it slowly eroded civil society to consolidate state control. By the 1960s, the military and monarchy imposed a

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<sup>55</sup> Narong Sinsawasdi and Ross Prizzia, “Evolution of the Thai Student Movement (1940-1974),” *Asia Quarterly*, no. 1 (1975): 3-54, <https://dspace.lib.hawaii.edu/items/fed3246a-0a52-49a2-ad97-6c50faeef809/full>, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Amnuay Tapingkae ed., “The Growth of Southeast Asian Universities: Expansion Versus Consolidation,” 157.

<sup>57</sup> Meredith Weiss, *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness* (Minnesota University Press, 2012).

political monopoly which few constituencies in Thailand had the structural organization or funding to oppose. With their numbers growing steadily throughout the mid-twentieth century, university students became uniquely positioned to step into the power vacuum created by state suppression. Furthermore, the expansion of university education to previously excluded groups meant that students were exposed to a wider range of local, national, and transnational issues and thus had greater motivation to create political change.

Yet, expanded university enrollment alone could not account for the outpouring of political sentiment that occurred on October 14th, 1973, when half a million demonstrators occupied the streets of Bangkok. At the time, the popular uprising was an anomaly in Thai history - never before had public protest managed to effect such sweeping or concrete change in national politics. How, then, did university students, many of whom were inexperienced in formal politics and had little support among the traditional sources of power in Thailand, orchestrate the country's most effective democratic movement to date? The answer lies in the unprecedented coalition-building among previously untapped political bases that was undertaken by the students and their supporters. According to historians David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, students under the guidance of the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) were, besides the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), the first group of activists to conduct outreach to the masses, particularly farmers and laborers who remained outside of political system even though these populations were "by far the largest potential interest groups in the country."<sup>58</sup> When representatives from eleven of Thailand's universities formed the NSCT as an inter-school organization in 1969, the group was initially focussed on providing social services, which included volunteering in low-income urban neighborhoods or raising funds for flood victims. The NSCT quickly began speaking on behalf of the interests and ideals of students

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<sup>58</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 154-155.



across Thailand's major universities, with the organization claiming that over 35-40% of the total university population were members by 1972.<sup>59</sup> Between 1972 and 1973 participation in the student movement skyrocketed to at least 80%.<sup>60</sup> Though schisms within the NSCT occurred due to ideological differences after the popular uprising, the organization was widely supported in the pre-October 14th period and accurately represented most student views during this time.

In the lead up to October 14th and the months that followed, the NSCT coordinated highly effective outreach to disenfranchised groups. The "Return to Countryside" or "Teaching Democracy" campaign was perhaps the NSCT's largest undertaking to engage the rural poor in the political process. Using a grant of \$500,000 from the administration of Prime Minister Sanya Dharmasakti (October 1973-February 1975), approximately 4,000 students visited provincial villages with the goal of providing civic education between March and May of 1974.<sup>61</sup> This initiative, and others like it, were intended to inform individuals of the rights they acquired after the democratic government was installed. Student efforts to work with poverty-stricken rural communities and urban 'slums' were bolstered by Prime Minister Sanya's Democracy Propagation Program, which publicized people's rights and responsibilities under a democratic system through films, presentations, pamphlets, and posters beginning in February of 1974.<sup>62</sup> Even if they did not effect immediate democratization in communities that had long been excluded from government decision-making, student outreach spread awareness of the transition in political power. As one student remarked upon his return from a civic education trip to Northern provinces, "Even in the most distant villages, they've heard about what happened in October. They never cared much about the Government before because they never felt it

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<sup>59</sup> Narong and Prizzia, *Thailand: Student Activism and Political Change* (Bangkok: D.K. Book House, 1974), 98.

<sup>60</sup> Narong and Prizzia, *Thailand: Student Activism and Political Change*, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Brewster Grace, "A Note on Thailand: The Student Rebellion and Political Change," *American Universities Field Staff Southeast Asia Series* 22, no. 4 (1974): 1-9, <http://www.icwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BG-3.pdf>, 8-9; Narong and Prizzia, "Evolution of the Thai Student Movement (1940-1974)," 53.

<sup>62</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 151.

concerned them; it was just the big people playing politics. Now they know ordinary people can do something... [i]t's created a new feeling."<sup>63</sup> What resulted from student efforts to collaborate across class and regional lines was referred to as *samprasan*, a "tripartite alliance of students, farmers, and workers."<sup>64</sup>

The student movement's strategy of conducting outreach among disenfranchised groups was successful because of the NSCT's social justice oriented goals and the inclusive language it used to bring more people into the fold. The rhetoric of student leaders, reproduced in the songs, poetry, and protest chants of the era, sought to create solidarity among non-elites through repeated reference to the shared suffering and ambitions of the people. Though many students were themselves wealthy children of the elite, they portrayed themselves as the people's equals vis-à-vis the rich and powerful. Leaflets widely distributed by the NSCT referred to the students as "the children of the people," and, in a declaration written by the NSCT's elected leader Theerayut Bunmee, the organization went so far as to say that "nobody can hurt the students without hurting the people," creating a sense of affinity and filial responsibility between the students and the public at large.<sup>65</sup> The first-person plural is also used by NSCT to position the organization's goals as one with those of the people. One of the student marching songs, sung at a 1973 rally at the Democracy Monument, reflected this rhetorical strategy with the words, "Fight without retreat, for the masses are waiting for us...we have joined together to fight for democracy."<sup>66</sup> Though women were not explicitly referred to in NSCT's goals and outreach, the

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<sup>63</sup> William Warren, "Letter From Bangkok," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1974, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1974/02/10/97470389.html?pageNumber=248>.

<sup>64</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> Theerayut Bunmee, "The Students Begin to Find the Target," Accessed in Narong and Prizzia, "Evolution of the Thai Student Movement (1940-1974)," 29. See also a November 16, 1972 NSCT leaflet addressed to the "Thai Citizen" in Narong and Prizzia, "Evolution of the Thai Student Movement (1940-1974)," 19.

<sup>66</sup> Narong and Prizzia, "Evolution of the Thai Student Movement (1940-1974)," 24.

use of gender neutral language and women's presence within student organizations alluded to their inclusion in the movement's target audience.



Figures 1 [left] and 2 [right]. Women participate in demonstrations prior to the October 14, 1973 uprising.

For the most part, women who were involved in the political agitation of October 1973 saw the ousting of the “Three Tyrants” as a collective victory. Women composed a significant portion of the crowd that demanded constitutional reform on October 14th. Most notably, a column of entirely women students marched with pictures of the King and Queen, appealing to the monarchy for political support.<sup>67</sup> Images of these women, pictured in Figure 1, indicate that they may have played on expectations for the *kulasatri*, depicting themselves as innocent schoolgirls who were loyal to the monarchy, with the goal of combatting law enforcement narratives of student provocation. In the language women activists used to describe the popular uprising and their participation in politics, they do not differentiate themselves from their male peers. The first-person plural is used by women like Yao Veerakitti, a high school student who participated in protests at Democracy Monument on October 13th, to explain the student's movement's success. In an interview with the *Bangkok Post* nearly fifty years after the popular

<sup>67</sup> Narong and Prizzia, “Evolution of the Thai Student Movement (1940-1974),” 37.

uprising, Yao continued to identify the protesters as a unified collective stating, “By working together we discovered our power and potential for making change... We were very happy.”<sup>68</sup>

From the language of the student movement and women protesters themselves, it can be inferred that though organizers deliberately sought to build bridges with ‘the people,’ namely the rural and urban working class, similar overtures were not made on the basis of gender. Women’s participation was taken for granted, and even though they made up a significant portion of the student body, women were not recruited as an affinity group. As a result, researchers in the early 1970s treated gender as an indicator of a student’s likelihood of belonging to a political organization, with men more likely to participate than their female counterparts.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, women were involved in formal politics at a lower rate than their male peers, with 14% of surveyed female students compared to 23% of male students belonging to student groups in 1969, even though they did comprise a significant portion of organizations like the NSCT.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, although some women, like Chiranan Pitpreecha, a Chulalongkorn University student whose poems became rallying cries for activists, did assume highly public roles in the student movement, the leadership of the NSCT and other groups like People for Democracy and the Federation of Independent Students of Thailand remained dominated by men.

Democracy and socio-economic reform, not gender equality, were the primary axes around which women in the student movement organized during the 1970s. When thinking about structural inequality, women and student activists focussed on class difference, seeking solidarity with populations on the basis of their socioeconomic status rather than their gender. The inclusive rhetoric of the student movement did enable fledgling women’s groups to form and led non-elite women to become self-conscious political actors in an unprecedented fashion. But,

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<sup>68</sup> Thana Boonlert, “Lessons of History,” *Bangkok Post*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/2197003/lessons-of-history>.

<sup>69</sup> Narong and Prizzia, *Thailand: Student Activism and Political Change*, 134.

<sup>70</sup> Narong and Prizzia, *Thailand: Student Activism and Political Change*, 119.

although women were able to carve out space for themselves in the participatory politics of the democratic period, they were subsumed by the universalizing rhetoric of the NSCT and were not recognized as a collective with their own grievances or goals. While women were welcomed and encouraged to take part in demonstrations as part of the non-gendered class of ‘the people,’ the implicit assumption was that male students would take the lead in political organizing.

### **The Hara Workers & Their Fight for Equality in the Factories**

Historians of the democratic period have dedicated significant attention to student’s coalition building efforts amongst rural farming communities and working class urban populations.<sup>71</sup> Many of these historians demonstrate how political consciousness-raising went both ways: While increasing awareness of ordinary people’s political rights under a democratic system, student activists also learned from the organizing tactics of agricultural workers and rural populations. More recently, the contributions of researchers such as Piya Pangsapa, author of *Textiles of Struggle: The Emergence of Resistance Among Garment Workers in Thailand*, have shed light on how urban labor organizing was similarly in conversation with student politics during the early 1970s. Like rural communities, urban workers were a substantial, but largely untapped, political base until the 1960s and early 1970s. During the development era, migration to Thailand’s cities rapidly increased as rural workers sought jobs in manufacturing industries, which boomed as the Thai government sought to cultivate an export-oriented economy. Women composed a significant portion of rural-urban migrants. In Thailand’s cities, many of these migrants found low-paying positions in the emerging textile industry and the informal sector, where they worked as street vendors, domestic laborers, or sex workers.<sup>72</sup> Many of these women

<sup>71</sup> See Tyrell Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*.

<sup>72</sup> Patana, “Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective”; Darunee Tantiwiranond, “Changing Gender Relations in Thailand: A Historical and Cultural Analysis,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* Vol. 4, no. 2 (1997): 167–198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152159700400203>.

had little education and performed unskilled or semi-skilled labor, lacking the resources to resist exploitation as they focussed on sending remittances to their families.

Although those employed in urban manufacturing often had little choice but to endure exploitative conditions in sectors whose expansion exceeded the pace of regulations, they were not helpless or hopeless. The revolutionary fervor and rights-driven rhetoric of the student movement quickly took root among urban workers, empowering many to challenge their immediate superiors and even the structural norms of capitalist production. By February of 1974, less than six months after the popular uprising, workers from Bangkok and surrounding areas organized more than two hundred strikes, including twenty four strikes on a single day in November of 1973.<sup>73</sup> From 1974-75 strikes occurred an average of twice a day.<sup>74</sup> Organizing was not limited to a single establishment - workers across companies often coordinated mass action that was aimed at industry-wide reform. For instance, in June of 1974, 10,000 textile workers walked out in a campaign for the equivalent of a twenty cent increase in daily wages.<sup>75</sup> These strikes began in factories, but quickly spread to business offices, banks, tourism and hospitality, air transit, hospitals, and Bangkok's waterworks and electrical authority.<sup>76</sup> Between 1973 and 1976, an estimated 1,200 worker uprisings occurred in total, many of which were organized by political organizations that formed after October 14, 1973.<sup>77</sup> The administrations of Prime Ministers Sanya Dharmasakti (1973-1975) and Seni Pramoj (February-March 1975 and April-October 1976) were relatively amenable to labor interests, and, under the Labor Department's oversight, laws passed to increase daily wages to 25 baht (approximately 80 cents),

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<sup>73</sup> Warren, "Letter From Bangkok."

<sup>74</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Grace, "A Note on Thailand: The Student Rebellion and Political Change," 8.

<sup>76</sup> Warren, "Letter From Bangkok."

<sup>77</sup> Tul Israngura Na Ayudhya and Apisid Pan-in, "Dreaming the Impossible Dreams: Reading the Working-Class Ideals in the Hara Factory Workers Struggle (1975)," *Rian Thai International Journal of Thai Studies*, (November 9, 2021): 34-57, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3957353>, 35; Data from Professor Montri Chenwidiyakan, Thammasat University, 1977 in Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 156.

set a legal working age of 15, and facilitate unionization were enforced with greater scrutiny.<sup>78</sup> In most instances of large-scale unrest, management relented to workers' demands, which often included salary increases, the "removal of 'dictatorial' superiors," and even previously rare welfare benefits such as hospitalization and tuition payments for employees' children.<sup>79</sup>

The shift in the balance of labor relations in favor of workers was not absolute. Many workers, especially those who were the most vulnerable owing to their age, educational background, and gender, continued to be exploited by employers who actively circumvented labor protections. Conditions were especially glaring in textile and clothing production, perhaps owing to the fact that women composed the majority of the labor force in this leading export industry.<sup>80</sup> At the Hara Company Factory, which produced jeans, shirts, and trousers for the international market, the exclusively female work-force took matters into their own hands after their employers continued to skirt their legal obligations in a struggle that, according to historians Apisid Pan-in and Tul Israngura Na Ayudhya, functioned as "a laboratory of socialism" and a "revolutionary model for a new mode of production."<sup>81</sup>

The Hara workers began to organize in response to a confluence of unsafe working conditions, wage-theft, and unjust termination of employment. According to workers, their employer refused to improve factory conditions, instructing laborers to treat themselves if they were pierced by a needle or experienced an electric shock as a result of the factory's leaking roof.<sup>82</sup> Many of the workers lived in a factory-owned dormitory, meaning their housing was contingent on their employment. When labor laws raised daily wages to 25 baht, Hara's

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<sup>78</sup> Jon Uengphakorn, director, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 1975, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJYITg2AIYA&t=1s>, 2:31-2:35, 5:51-5:55; Warren, "Letter From Bangkok."

<sup>79</sup> Warren, "Letter From Bangkok."

<sup>80</sup> In 1973 the textile industry accounted for approximately 17% of Thailand's gross domestic product. See Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 189.

<sup>81</sup> Tul and Apisid, "Dreaming the Impossible Dreams: Reading the Working-Class Ideals in the Hara Factory Workers Struggle (1975)."

<sup>82</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 8:17-8:24.

management was forced to pay workers more, but after doing so, they refused to continue providing meals to those who lived in the dormitory, deducting the cost of food from their wages and effectively neutralizing the pay increase.<sup>83</sup> When the Hara factory at Orm Yai first attempted to organize in the summer of 1975, the company refused to negotiate in good faith and the seven women chosen to represent the workers' interests were promptly fired.

On October 4, 1975, after conditions became unbearable, the workers at the Hara factories submitted ten demands to the Hara Company, which included the rehiring of the representatives from Orm Yai, the provision of meals, regular wage increases, and welfare in accordance with labor laws.<sup>84</sup> When the workers were attacked by thugs hired by the Hara Company five days after issuing their demands, the Labor Department intervened, requiring the employer to sign a contract. Though the Hara Company at first seemed to comply, paying the workers a month advance in wages, it secretly moved its machinery to a new location and announced the dismissal of all workers at its Rom Phai Ngerm Street site. Rather than making peace with their situation and searching for new opportunities, the women employed at Rom Phai Ngerm Street made the decision to occupy the abandoned factory, which they reopened under the name of the United Labourers Factory (ULF).

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<sup>83</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 2:31-3:00.

<sup>84</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 10:34-11:20.





Figure 3. Women workers at the Hara Factory strike in October, 1975.

The workers' vision for ULF reflected their engagement with the revolutionary politics and leftist ideology that dominated the democratic political discourse. After occupying the abandoned Hara Factory for two months, the workers decided to reopen the factory "as a means of bargaining with the capitalist."<sup>85</sup> They did so by selling approximately 300 shares in ULF (amounting to between 7,000 and 8,000 baht) and using the resulting revenue to buy raw materials and machinery. Workers attempted to keep the cost of their product low, selling their goods to the public outside of the main conference hall at Thammasat University each Sunday. Profits were shared evenly amongst the workers, with funding allocated for factory upkeep, food, and remittances for the workers' families. As shareholders in ULF, the women saw themselves as "fighting for each and every one of us," because regardless of who their employers were, urban laborers were all "oppressed in the same way."<sup>86</sup> Women who were a part of ULF frequently referenced a need to "combine our strength" with other oppressed groups and the "long suffering public" in order to secure the rights promised by the democratic government.<sup>87</sup> By promoting

<sup>85</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 19:03.

<sup>86</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 21:08, 43:09.

<sup>87</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 43:53-43:58, 44:20.

class solidarity and selling goods at low prices while continuing to pay employees well, the ULF sought to “let the capitalists know that it’s the labourers who are the ones who can do the work” without resorting to exploitation.<sup>88</sup>

Though most of the Hara workers’ rhetoric focussed on class struggle and proletariat solidarity, there were some indications that the workers were conscious of gender as an important factor in their campaign for social welfare and equal rights. In interviews with documentary filmmaker Jon Uengphakorn, women repeatedly refer to their adversaries as the “Capitalist.” This generic Capitalist, who is the perpetrator of what the women see as an unjust economic system, is presented as a male figure. In their references to the Capitalist, women rely exclusively on male pronouns, noting how, “*He* has become wealthy because of the high prices [emphasis added],” for example.<sup>89</sup> These remarks can be interpreted as evidence that, to an extent, women were conscious of their dual subjugation as workers and as women.

Although the Hara workers drew from Marxist intellectual thought and the student movement’s revolutionary language, the project of ULF was distinguished from pre-existing models of labor organizing in Thailand. The Hara Factory strike and the formation of ULF demonstrate that women and members of the working class were not simply following the example of male-led student organizations. In spite of the limited resources at their disposal, laborers at the Hara Company found innovative ways of resisting unlawful exploitation. The women leading ULF actualized the revolutionary ideals of the democratic period and, in doing so, they inspired other members of the *samprasan* political alliance. Although representatives of ULF were eventually arrested and the facility was forced to close, the five month occupation of the factory encouraged students, neighbors, members of the press, and other laborers to visit and

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<sup>88</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 42:56.

<sup>89</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 23:49.

learn from their operations. These visits often mobilized other laborers. As one woman at ULF commented, one group of young women workers who visited the facilities “got the idea that they have to demand their rights. They made their demands to their capitalist who promptly gave two factories to them.”<sup>90</sup> Whether or not this claim is entirely factual, it remains uncontested that “Hara had set an example” for other workers and the broader public, prompting them to push back against or, at the very least, to question the roots of economic inequality.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 42:16-42:23.

<sup>91</sup> Jon, *Hara Factory Workers Struggle*, 42:31.

#### **IV. The Equal Rights Clause: Constitutional Change & the Legal Status of Women**

During the 1973-1976 period, women took advantage of the unprecedented democratic political environment and promoted gender-based reforms with far more success than they had achieved in previous decades. One of the areas where concrete reform manifested most clearly was the law. As historian Tyrell Haberkorn argues, the law was historically the domain of elites in Thailand, who used legal instruments to execute their own will. This dynamic is captured in the Thai phrase: “The class that writes the laws, certainly writes the laws for that class” (*chonchan dai khian kotmai ko nae sai phua chonchan nan*).<sup>92</sup> Those who wrote the laws in Thailand for much of the twentieth century were not only upper-class, urban elites, they were also overwhelmingly men. According to Haberkorn, what made the actions of previously marginalized groups, like rural farmers, so revolutionary during the mid-1970s was the manner in which they “made themselves not only the objects but also the subjects of the law and forced landowners and the state to become accountable to them.”<sup>93</sup> The following chapter will argue that, much like farmers from the rural North, who are the subject of Haberkorn’s analysis, women began to use the law as a “tool of organizing and liberation” under the democratic government.<sup>94</sup> The Constitution of 1974 was the most significant legal development that enabled women to secure rights and political leverage.

#### **From Objects of the Law to (De Jure) Subjects**

Until the early twentieth century, Siamese and Thai law codified women’s subjugation to men. The *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang* (or Laws of the Three Seals), a corpus of laws which were enacted in 1805 under King Rama I and used through the reign of King Chulalongkorn

<sup>92</sup> Tyrell Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand*, 21.

<sup>93</sup> Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand*, 5.

(1882-1909), included multiple provisions that reinforced women's inferior status vis-à-vis to men.<sup>95</sup> Relationships between women and their husbands were structured by the "Family Law" (*Kotmai laksana phua mia*) which dictated that "a woman was not a free agent and had to be placed under someone else's protection," considered "an item in a man's assets" alongside children, servants, and property.<sup>96</sup> Situated as material belongings rather than rights-bearers, women were legally bound to the decisions made by their male guardians, who were permitted to "sell" or give away their wives or daughters without their consent. Women were subjected to a sexual double standard, as well. While a husband retained the legal right to kill his wife if she committed adultery, male polygamy was protected by law and encouraged as a mark of prestige for members of the monarchy and nobility.<sup>97</sup>

Not only were women classified as property under the *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang*, they were quite literally assigned a lower value than their male counterparts according to the "Law on People's Rank" (*Kotmai laksana phomsak*). Per the Law on People's Rank, which set rates of compensation for men and women who sold themselves into slavery, the price of men was higher than that of similarly aged women (48 baht and 40 baht, respectively, for men and women who were between 16 and 20 years old).<sup>98</sup> The legal discourse around property distribution in divorce settlements also contributed to the idea that women's economic roles were inferior to and less valuable than men's work. Courts acted on the presumption that men shouldered more responsibility in the household and were thus entitled to a far greater proportion of common property than their wives in divorce settlements.<sup>99</sup> Under the *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang*, women's

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<sup>95</sup> United States Agency for International Development, "The Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas, Survey Report," 1977, [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAE439.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAE439.pdf), 65; Suwadee T. Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," in *Women's Studies in Thailand: Power, Knowledge, and Justice*, edited by Suwanna Satha-anand, 99-129, Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2005, 104.

<sup>96</sup> *Kotmai laksana phua mia* directly translates to "Law on Husbands and Wives," but will be referred to in this paper as "Family Law" see Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," 104.

<sup>97</sup> Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," 105.

<sup>98</sup> Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," 106.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

status as objects rather than subjects of the law was uncontested. Though women were bound to comply with the law, under severe penalty to be meted out by the courts or their male guardians, the law gave them few rights or protections in return.

Thai women's legal status began to change with the passage of the 1932 Constitution, which brought an end to nearly eight centuries of absolute monarchical rule and introduced universal political rights for all of those who were classified as citizens. Nominally, the rights of citizens, including suffrage and eligibility for political office, were extended to women in keeping with the modern progressive attitudes of the post-revolution regime. Other key provisions in the 1930s signaled a shift in women's relationships with the law. In 1935, Book V of the Civil and Commercial Code voided earlier decrees that permitted male polygamy and men's legal control over their wives or daughters.<sup>100</sup> Though it did not create positive rights for women and was often disregarded in practice, the 1935 law rolled back women's legal subordination, which was increasingly seen as incompatible with the image of modernity and progress that Thailand sought to project to the international community. The conception of family law articulated by the 1935 Civil and Commercial Code combined "the traditional notion of women's subordinate status and the modern notion of equality between the sexes" to create limited improvements for women in the private sphere.<sup>101</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, references to women as property and practices such as the sale of wives or daughters ceased to be publicly accepted features of family law. However, the de facto exclusion of women from legal protections persisted.

In practice, Thailand's legal system continued to assume that rights-holders were male, although the Constitution of 1932 and later provisions often used vague, gender-neutral language

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Patana, "Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective," 123.

to refer to the rights of citizens. Article 14 of the 1932 Constitution guaranteed that “[a]ny citizen, regardless of sex, who has the following qualifications has the right to vote for the village representative.”<sup>102</sup> This clause was exceptionally clear in referring to citizens as a category that included both men and women, yet, “laws, attitudes and customary practices have not always respected this constitutional imperative.”<sup>103</sup> Later iterations of the Constitution removed Article 14’s explicit references to the rights of citizens “regardless of sex.”<sup>104</sup> Although these versions of the Constitution supposedly upheld de jure equality for all, the neutral descriptors they relied upon to outline constitutional protections diluted women’s ability to exercise their rights as citizens. In the absence of clear language specifying that women were entitled to constitutional privileges, Thailand’s legal system could continue to situate men as the primary rights-holders. Thus apart from reforms to family law, which enabled women to better protect their interests in divorce and marriage proceedings, women in mid-twentieth century Thailand did not yet have the tools to advance their interests through the law.

### **Writing the Constitution of 1974**

Demands for constitutional change were at the root of the popular uprising in 1973. The thirteen members of the National Student Center for Thailand who sparked the October 14, 1973 demonstrations were even referred to as the Thirteen Constitutional Rebels because they were jailed after distributing leaflets that advocated for a rewriting of the constitution.<sup>105</sup> After the “Three Tyrants” fled Thailand and the new government assumed control, many saw the drafting

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<sup>102</sup> Suteera Thomson and Maytinee Bhongsvej, “Putting Women’s Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand,” Gender and Development Research Institute (July 1996), 2.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Fifteen iterations of Thailand’s constitution were abrogated and enacted from 1932-1996. While these foundational legal documents varied, they remained relatively consistent in their adherence to the model of constitutional monarchy that was first articulated in 1932.

<sup>105</sup> Erich Parpart, “The Lessons of 1973 and Overcoming Opposition,” Bangkok: *The Thai Enquirer*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/33914/opinion-the-lessons-of-1973-and-overcoming-opposition/>.

of a new constitution as a referendum on progressive politics and an indicator of “how far the revolution of October 1973 [would] go.”<sup>106</sup> Shortly after the democratic government acceded to power, the Cabinet appointed an eighteen member Constitution Drafting Committee to produce a foundational legal document that would respond to the ideals and interests of the people.<sup>107</sup> The Committee’s drafting process was framed by an explosion of political discontent throughout late 1973 and 1974 in the form of large-scale strikes and demonstrations by tens of thousands of farmers, factory workers, and members of other discontented groups. At hearings open to the general public, the Public Participation Subcommittee invited citizens to share their discontent and actively participate in national politics and the legal drafting process for the first time. Heated public debate over topics like agricultural subsidies, labor unions, and the distribution of political power indicated that the revolution of 1973 and the Constitution it spawned would go quite far, indeed, in upholding the progressive social ideals towards which the 1973 uprising and subsequent protests were geared.<sup>108</sup>

The post-1973 political climate, in which progressive student leadership played an outsized role, was more hospitable to explicitly enshrining women’s rights in the law. Around the time that the Constitution was promulgated in 1974, Thailand saw a proliferation of public demonstrations for improved political and economic conditions, including what one foreign correspondent referred to as the country’s first formal rally on behalf of women’s rights.<sup>109</sup> An unprecedented outpouring of social grievances at the time of the Constitution’s drafting allowed groups like women, farmers, and members of the working class to envision political and legal futures that once seemed impossible. While politics and the law were previously opaque

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<sup>106</sup> Jeffrey Race, “Thailand in 1974: A New Constitution,” *Asian Survey* Vol. 15, no. 2 (Feb. 1975): 157-165, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2643326>, 157.

<sup>107</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 99.

<sup>108</sup> See Race, “Thailand in 1974: A New Constitution” for a contemporaneous discussion of the various ideological splits during the constitutional drafting process.

<sup>109</sup> Race, “Thailand in 1974: A New Constitution,” 163.



enterprises, seen as the prerogative of elites, the 1973 uprising opened the doors to the possibility that equality and civil rights could be advanced through official channels of government. With expanded access to the political sphere, women were empowered to vocalize their demands that gender equality be explicitly recognized, rather than loosely implied, in the Constitution and its derivative laws. Many activists and members of the new government saw women's political involvement as a crucial element for "effect[ing] the changes for the benefit of women themselves."<sup>110</sup> As participants in the popular uprising and student movement, women were better positioned to directly contribute to law-making and the democratic political process. Thanks to their inclusion in the constitutional drafting process, women were ultimately (if only temporarily) successful in ensuring that democratic ideals related to equality and liberty were not simply abstract principles, but substantiated in the law itself.

### **Looking at Language: The Equal Rights Clause & Implementation Measures**

In both its participatory drafting process and its content, the Constitution of 1974 aimed to reflect the spirit of the democratic period and the interests of newly mobilized constituents. The stated priorities of the Constitution ultimately included efforts to

“adhere to the democratic system of government, enact laws for social justice, take all measures to narrow and eliminate, step by step, the economic and social gaps between the individuals, cooperate in the relief of grievance and the promotion of happiness, protect the rights and liberty of all people equally, and uphold the rule of law, in order that justice may be accorded to all people.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Suteera and Maytinee, “Putting Women’s Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand,” 13.

<sup>111</sup> Constitution of Thailand (1974), Preamble.

One of the ways in which the new constitution furthered concepts such as universal liberty or social justice was by acknowledging the rights of women and their equal legal status to men. In unambiguous terms, Chapter II, Section 28 of the 1974 Constitution asserted that “[a]ll persons enjoy the rights and liberty under the constitution. Men and women have equal rights.”<sup>112</sup> According to contemporary scholars of law and gender equality in Thailand, this language ensured that, for the first time, “[w]omen’s legal status was made explicit [and] inequality based on sex was prohibited.”<sup>113</sup> The Constitution did not simply introduce women’s rights as an abstract principle - it set clear guidelines for the timely implementation of the gender equality clause in Section 236. This provision called for “the amendment of laws or enactment of new laws granting equal rights to men and women” in two years or less from the date of the Constitution’s promulgation.<sup>114</sup> Though these measures were not all-encompassing solutions to deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities, they did provide the scaffolding for a legal apparatus that accommodated gender equality and treated women as subjects with access to judicial recourse.

None of the legal advancements regarding the status of women would have been possible without women’s increased participation in academia, politics, and the legal profession in the early 1970s. Expanded access to higher education and the relative openness of the democratic period enabled women to assume decision-making positions where they influenced the development of the law and the Constitution. Professor Pongpen Sakuntabhai, a member of the Constitution of 1974’s Drafting Committee, succinctly acknowledged women’s role in securing a legal foundation for gender equality stating that “[i]n the drafting of the 1974 constitution, had there been no female committee member, the article advocating the equality between men and

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<sup>112</sup> Constitution of Thailand (1974), Section 236.

<sup>113</sup> Suteera and Maytinee, “Putting Women’s Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand,” 2-3.

<sup>114</sup> Constitution of Thailand (1974), Section 236.

women might have been non-existent.”<sup>115</sup> Women themselves were largely responsible for putting gender equality in the constitution and reformulating both “the substantive or content and the cultural or attitudinal components of the legal system.”<sup>116</sup> Although many of the legal protections related to gender equality did not survive the October 1976 coup, their legacy endured in a new generation which saw the law as a viable tool for elevating the status of women.

### **The Practical Limitations of the Gender Equality Clause**

In spite of the hopes attached to the Constitution’s gender equality clause and supplementary legislation that was passed to enact this clause during the democratic period, these legal reforms did not result in widespread or lasting change. After the October 6th coup, the regime abrogated the Constitution of 1974 and reverted to neutral language when referencing the rights of citizens. When the process of drafting a new constitution began in 1978, two female senators campaigned to include the same guarantees for women’s rights that were articulated in the Constitution of 1974. However, these senators did not garner significant support from their predominantly male peers who argued that “an explicit statement was unnecessary” because “[e]quality for all citizens was interpreted as inclusive of both women and men.”<sup>117</sup> In the end, the Constitution framed equal political rights using general terms that did not reference gender. Without clear protections in place, gender equality became a low priority for legislators and women lost many of the privileges they had begun to obtain in 1974.

Even while the democratic government was in power, challenges with enforcement and a lack of consensus among various sects of the leftist movement rendered many attempts to

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<sup>115</sup> Suteera and Maytinee, “Putting Women’s Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand,” 13.

<sup>116</sup> Suteera and Maytinee, “Putting Women’s Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand,” 9.

<sup>117</sup> Suteera and Maytinee, “Putting Women’s Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand,” 10.

advance gender equality moot. The Civil and Commercial Amendment Act, passed on October 5th of 1976, was one initiative which failed to foster significant improvements in the lives of ordinary women, in spite of its aspirations.<sup>118</sup> At face value, this act constituted a large step forward for women by eliminating discriminatory laws concerning the right to file for divorce, to buy and sell property, and to participate in business transactions.<sup>119</sup> Granted, there was little time to implement this law before the coup occurred and effectively halted government operations on October 6th. Even before the unrest and tumult caused by the coup, though, there were signs that the general public, especially in rural areas, was not aware of the law or how it would affect them.<sup>120</sup> In practice, then, the potentially sweeping reach of the Civil and Commercial Amendment Act was relatively limited.

Many of the laws passed in compliance with the Constitution of 1974 aimed to increase women's participation in professional sectors where they were historically underrepresented, such as law and politics. Women's marginalization in these fields was a product of the historical "sexual division of labour, according to which men were dominant in the political sphere whereas women were economically productive."<sup>121</sup> Laws like the aforementioned Civil and Commercial Amendment Act included measures that were specifically concerned with women's professional rights, such as the pronouncement that there should be "no legal constraints against a Thai woman entering any profession."<sup>122</sup> The Civil and Commercial Amendment Act even cited labor laws which required that "men and women should receive equal pay for equal work," a remarkably progressive provision considering that widely held gender norms in Thailand

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<sup>118</sup> The official title of the act in question is the Civil and Commercial Code Amendment Act, Book V, Family Law, Office of the Judicial Council's Welfare Fund, Bangkok, 1976.

<sup>119</sup> United States Agency for International Development, "The Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas, Survey Report," 65.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Darunee Tantiwiranond, "Changing Gender Relations in Thailand: A Historical and Cultural Analysis," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* Vol. 4, no. 2 (1997): 167–198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152159700400203>, 169.

<sup>122</sup> United States Agency for International Development, "The Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas, Survey Report," 67.

continued to assign a lower status to women's work in the 1970s.<sup>123</sup> In some ways, these legal instruments were successful in promoting women's professional inclusion. With respect to the law, positions like judges and public prosecutors became available to women for the first time in 1975.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, the Ministry of the Interior and other government departments were opened to women, who became eligible for civil service examinations for all bureaucratic positions after the Civil and Commercial Code Amendment Act was passed.<sup>125</sup>

Though women began to chip away at the glass ceiling during the 1970s, they were still barred by law from holding certain positions such as village or commune chief (per the Local Administrative Act of 1914) and district officers, district accountants, provincial excise inspectors, and forest officials (according to the Civil Service Regulations).<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, even in the absence of legal barriers, the fact that women *could* hold certain positions did not necessarily mean that they became proportionally represented in these roles. There continued to be serious gender-based discrepancies in professional and administrative fields, especially law and public health. In 1975, while 3,800,000 men were registered lawyers and 859,000 were registered judges, there were only 81,000 and 19,000 women in these professions, respectively.<sup>127</sup> Though women participated in higher education at comparable rates to their male peers, and thus boasted similar professional qualifications, the lack of female representation in law and politics indicated that cultural or behavioral shifts needed to accompany legal pathways to gender equality.

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<sup>123</sup> United States Agency for International Development, "The Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas, Survey Report," 68.

<sup>124</sup> Tin Prachyapruit, "Thailand's Female Elite Civil Servants and Their Development-Orientedness: A Comparative Study Utilizing National Data," Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Department of Political Science, 1990, <http://www.library.polsci.chula.ac.th/dl/bab3b3065f29dc2e4cb8273ddcb0cc75>, 67; Suteera and Maytinee, "Putting Women's Rights in the Constitution: An Experience of Thailand," 3.

<sup>125</sup> United States Agency for International Development, "The Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas, Survey Report," Appendix 1, page 2.

<sup>126</sup> Tin, "Thailand's Female Elite Civil Servants and Their Development-Orientedness: A Comparative Study Utilizing National Data," 67.

<sup>127</sup> A relatively similar number of men and women received graduate degrees in 1975 - 560,000 men compared to 557,000 women. See United States Agency for International Development, "The Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas, Survey Report," Appendix 1, page 3.

Apart from the challenges with ensuring that de jure gender equality translated to de facto improvements in the status and inclusion of women, the Constitution of 1974's brief tenure meant that its espoused principles of liberty and equality were not permanently incorporated into many of Thailand's laws. It is difficult to assess the structural impact of a Constitution that was in effect for less than two years, a period so short that the implementation requirements of Section 236 did not have time to take effect. Available evidence indicates that while Section 28 and 236 of the Constitution and laws like the Civil and Commercial Amendment Act marked significant, even revolutionary, progress towards the cause of gender equality, they were not enough to ensure that women's status improved in practice. In order to facilitate gender equality on the ground, even amid a political environment that was relatively receptive to gender based reforms, laws like these required additional investments in economic opportunities for women and educational programs aimed at changing social norms.

## V. The Gendered Nature of Violence in the October 6th Massacre

### Shame and Sexual Violence as Instruments of Control

On the morning of October 6th 1976, Thammasat University's campus became a bloody battlefield when at 5:30am a rocket-propelled bomb was fired over the university's gates and machine gun fire began to rain down, scattering students who were sheltered inside.<sup>128</sup> At the time, between four and five thousand students were gathered on Thammasat's campus after convening on October 4th to protest the return of General Thanom Kittikachorn, the dictator ousted by the popular uprising, and the public hanging of two labor activists in late September. Law enforcement and right-wing organizations used the demonstrations at Thammasat, which they claimed were subversive, anti-monarchical, and the product of communist ideology, as a pretext for cracking down on the student protests and, later, the civilian government. Over the course of the morning on October 6th, the students huddled within Thammasat's soccer field and academic buildings were brutalized and arrested by the hundreds as police officers and members of right-wing groups such as the Village Scouts, the Red Guard (*Krating daeng*), and the Nawaphon. Violence was universally inflicted on the student protesters who remained on Thammasat's premises, unable or unwilling to follow those who fled along the Chao Phraya river and hid in the surrounding neighborhood on the outskirts of Bangkok.<sup>129</sup> Many of those who escaped the initial campus onslaught were also subjected to physical harm and arrest, pulled out of the Chao Phraya at gunpoint by Border Patrol Police (BPP) or arrested in their homes on the grounds of supposed communist subversion.<sup>130</sup> Though violence affected nearly all of those present at Thammasat on October 6th, it was not suffered uniformly by the students and their

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<sup>128</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 27.

<sup>129</sup> Suchada Chakpisuth, "Unforgettable, Unrememberable: The Thammasat Massacre in Thailand," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 15, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unforgettable-unrememberable-the-thammasat-massacre-in-thailand/>.

<sup>130</sup> David A. Andelman, "4,000 Thais Arrested Since Military Coup," *The New York Times*, October 21, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/21/archives/4000-thais-arrested-since-military-coup.html>.

allies. Women participating in the student protest at Thammasat were subjected to distinct forms of sexualized violence and shame by militants and law enforcement officers.

Many observers in Thailand and the international community were shocked by the brutality of the violence enacted against student activists and their allies at Thammasat, which seemed like the “ritualistic performance of the conqueror” in its scale and public nature.<sup>131</sup> The four to five thousand students who had gathered to protest the return of dictator Thanom Kittichachorn on October 6th were hanged, shot, beaten to a bloody pulp, and forced to strip or surrender at gunpoint, often as spectators looked on with glee, throwing rocks or jeering at the “communists” as they were assaulted or carted off to jail.<sup>132</sup> The bodies of many murdered activists were desecrated. Notably, Jaruphong Thongsin, a student leader who helped clear the Student Union Building at the onset of the October 6th attack, was dragged by his neck across the Thammasat soccer field after he was killed,<sup>133</sup> and a young man, whose identity to this day remains unknown, was attacked with a chair while hanging from a tree outside of Thammasat, as depicted in a Pulitzer Prize winning photo taken by Neal Ulevich.<sup>134</sup> These acts led novelist and historian David Morell to attest to the U.S. House Subcommittee on International Organizations that the October 1976 coup was “marked by kinds of violence, even atrocity, that were previously unheard of and would have been considered ‘un-Thai’ behavior only a few years earlier.”<sup>135</sup>

Years after the massacre, grieving friends and family members, like Siemkieng Junlakin, the mother of Poranee, a young female student killed on October 6th, continued to

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<sup>131</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 51.

<sup>132</sup> Sudarat Musikawong, “Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence,” *Meridians* Vol. 11, no. 2 (2011), 189.

<sup>133</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 30-31.

<sup>134</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 231.

<sup>135</sup> U.S. Congress, *Human Rights in Thailand*, 95th Cong., 1st sess., 1977.



ask of the perpetrators, “Why did they have to be so violent?”<sup>136</sup> There is no simple answer to this question, as the motivations of individual actors and various paramilitary and law enforcement organizations differed greatly. Among leading interpretations of October 6th are the convictions that the anti-leftist Cold War context, royalist ideology, or a tradition of American-funded military dominance were responsible for the outpouring of extreme brutality on October 6th.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, right-wing groups grew rapidly in 1974 and 1975 in response to increasing frustration with popular politics and the frequency of disruptive protests. Paramilitary organizations affiliated with right-wing politics were fueled by royalist and military propaganda, which exaggerated links between the student movement and the violent communist insurgency. The right wing and its supporters claimed that their hostility towards the students was necessary to defend their “slogans of nation, religion, and monarchy, regarded as the sacred pillars of the country... which the communists were allegedly trying to destroy.”<sup>138</sup> Yet the particularity of the violence enacted against women at Thammasat’s campus requires a more gender-specific analysis. The following chapter seeks to contribute to such an analysis, adding to the work of scholars such as Sudarat Musikawong by arguing that perpetrators sought to uphold a masculine iteration of Thai nationalism by disciplining, dehumanizing, and controlling politically active women.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Sudarat, “Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence,” 199.

<sup>137</sup> Jasmine Chia, “Remembering October 6 in Words and Pictures,” Bangkok: *The Thai Enquirer*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/19329/remembering-october-6-in-words-and-pictures/>.

<sup>138</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 33.

<sup>139</sup> Public debates have ensued in Thailand over how to record and remember the traumatic events of October 6th. Some activists insist that scholars, the media, and the general public should refrain from forcing those who were impacted by the massacre to relive the past. Yet, there is a difference between avoiding unnecessarily graphic depictions of violence and reproducing a culture of silence around the events of October 6th. While remaining sensitive to the interests of survivors and their families, historians like Sudarat and Thongchai point out the need to procure justice for the victims by reflecting on the past and holding perpetrators accountable. According to this school of thought, studying violence against women can counteract perpetrators’ efforts to dehumanize their victims. In other words, it is possible to uplift the humanity of victims and survivors while ensuring that the historical record does not perpetuate ignorance in relation to October 6th.

Official records show that of the forty-three individuals killed on October 6th by state and paramilitary forces, four were women.<sup>140</sup> Although women were a fraction of the dead, the nature and severity of the violence inflicted against the deceased female activists warrants investigation. Like their male counterparts, the women assaulted on October 6th endured extreme physical harm, including posthumous violence. One of the young women killed on October 6th, Poranee, was a student at Thammasat and the first person in her hometown to attend university. Yet Poranee's identity and humanity seem to have been disregarded by the vigilantes who killed her. Decades later, in a 1996 interview with *Feature Magazine*, Poranee's mother Siemkieng said that after Poranee was shot, her attackers beat her with a rifle handle until her legs and arms were broken and her body was nearly unrecognizable.<sup>141</sup> After her death, Poranee was accused in the media and by right wing spokespersons of being "un-Thai" on the basis of both her ethnicity and political activism. Specifically, Poranee was painted as a Vietnamese or Chinese communist, a claim that Siemkieng responded to with indignation: "How is she Vietnamese, she is from Ban Beung district, she is our child!"<sup>142</sup> These attempts to alienate Poranee from her identity as a Thai woman reflect how right-wing groups responded to and made sense of women like Poranee's participation in leftist politics, which did not fit into dominant visions of Thai national identity and expectations for women's roles as passive citizens. In the aftermath of October 6th, the press, law enforcement, and right-wing political forces often alleged that the student victims were foreigners, referring to them as "Yuan," a slang term for Vietnamese people and ethnic others. These groups also accused the activists of being "non-Thai" because of their departure from "traditional" Thai values related to the monarchy, anti-communism, and political passivity.<sup>143</sup> By

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<sup>140</sup> Sudarat, "Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence," 176.

<sup>141</sup> Sudarat, "Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence," 199.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 55.

othering the deceased students, allies of the October 6th perpetrators could justify their physical aggression on the basis of national defense.



*Figure 4. Watcharee Petsun was killed during the October 6th massacre. In this image, Watcharee is in the custody of Village Scouts and police officers. Watcharee's clothes would later be removed in an apparent act of posthumous sexual assault.*

The sexual assault of female victims, including twenty year old Watcharee Petsun, was perhaps the most extreme expression of gendered brutality on October 6th. Before she died from what the official autopsy report notes as three bullets to the back, Watcharee was a chemistry student at Ramkhamhaeng University.<sup>144</sup> Yet, as in the case of Poranee, Watcharee's humanity was cast aside when unidentified assailants attacked her lifeless body. Although the exact events that occurred after Watcharee's death are unclear, photographic evidence from October 6th shows Watcharee's body on a stretcher, fully clothed though bloodied, and in the custody of officials and Village Scouts, who are identifiable by their uniforms and characteristic neck scarves.<sup>145</sup> Later images of Watcharee show her lying in a public space, likely at Thammasat or

<sup>144</sup> "The Young Woman Who Was Violated on the Morning of October 6, 1976," Documentation of Oct 6 Website, March 4, 2019, <https://doct6.com/archives/13421>.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

the nearby Sanam Luang park, with her clothes removed and a wooden stake placed close to her genitals.<sup>146</sup> The brief autopsy report issued by the Bangkok coroner's office does not note rape or sexual assault, mentioning only Watcharee's bullet wounds.<sup>147</sup> Still, if the autopsy report can be considered accurate and Watcharee was not raped, the staging and photographing of Watcharee's body to imply that her dignity had been violated in such a violent fashion was a gendered act of public cruelty. Due to poor government reporting, a lack of trust in authorities, and the stigma associated with sexual assault, it is not possible to know precisely how many additional acts of sexual violence occurred at Thammasat on October 6th. However, the personal accounts and eyewitness testimony of multiple women describe the prevalence of harassment, rape, and sexual assault in potentially dozens of instances of gender-based violence.<sup>148</sup> By committing heinous crimes in a public space, and never facing accountability for their actions, those who attacked Watcharee and other female students during the massacre sent the threatening message that they could degrade a woman's humanity with impunity.

Physical and sexual violence were not the only instruments of dehumanization used against women on October 6th. Public humiliation and shame also allowed male vigilantes to reinscribe control over women's sexuality and autonomy. At the hands of both state authorities and civilian members of paramilitary groups, women were required to comply with invasive searches and commands to strip before lying down on the Thammasat football field. After they surrendered, male and female students alike were told to remove their clothing so that they could be distinguished from the plainclothes police officers and ordinary people who were working with law enforcement.<sup>149</sup> Yet the experience of taking off their shirts was particularly harrowing for young women like Mien, a railway worker who was on a hunger strike at Thammasat when

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> "Autopsy Document B021 Ms. Watcharee Petsun," Documentation of Oct 6 Website, <https://doct6.com/archives/5682>.

<sup>148</sup> Sudarat, "Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence," 179.

<sup>149</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 55.

the massacre began. For women in Thailand, social etiquette and state rhetoric reinforced modesty of dress as a mark of respectability for the “modern” woman.<sup>150</sup> Thus, the forced removal of the women’s clothing both signified the female activists’ vulnerability to sexual violence and symbolized the deprivation of their respectability or dignity. In her remarks to the 6th October 1976 Fact-Finding and Witness Interviewing Committee, Mien recalled that a soldier commanded surrendering students to remove their clothing at gunpoint, warning the group of cowering young people that they would be shot if they resisted or tried to escape.<sup>151</sup> As Mien emerged from her hiding place, a soldier blocked her path, seized her purse, necklace, and rings and demanded to know why she was associated with the student demonstrators. At that moment, Mien said, “[t]hey forced our shirts off and I believed I was going to die, so, unafraid, I screamed.”<sup>152</sup> Mien’s experience demonstrates how the act of removing their clothing under the command of armed forces made women feel that they were on the verge of death or grave harm, in a state of utter vulnerability vis-à-vis the male soldiers.



*Figure 5. Students and their allies were forced to remove their clothing and lie down in a dehumanizing act of surrender to police and members of the military.*

<sup>150</sup> Suwadee Patana, “The Politics of Women’s Dress in Thai Society, 1945-1970,” *Association for Asia Studies* in the 5th International Conference on Thai Studies, (1993).

<sup>151</sup> Sudarat, “Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence,” 189.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

In the weeks and months after October 6th, state-sponsored media discredited and belittled women activists, making light of their degradation at the hands of paramilitaries and the police. Channel 5 of the Royal Thai Army Radio and Television Station (TV5) worked to excuse the actions of those who attacked the activists at Thammasat and, in doing so, erase the experiences of student protesters and their allies. The TV5 hosts repeatedly claimed that female students were not ordered to take off their clothes and did so of their own will. In doing so, the media was playing into perceptions that women who were active in politics or public life, generally, were sexually promiscuous and fundamentally different from the *kulasatri*, an idealized, chaste woman who was expected to be preoccupied with the family and the private sphere. While covering the events of October 6th, TV5 further downplayed women's outrage by noting that those forced to comply with law enforcement orders weren't *entirely* nude, they still wore their bras. This line of commentary was so commonplace that it became "a kind of sexual jest among the all-male commentators."<sup>153</sup> Though sexual innuendo about women proliferated in popular media after October 6th, there was no comparable ridiculing of male protesters, who were also forced to remove their shirts after they surrendered.<sup>154</sup> Like the violence of the massacre itself, the state-sanctioned media's response to the October 6th massacre indicates that post-coup authorities often relied on sexual shame and othering narratives to discredit the student protesters, particularly politically active women who departed from traditional gendered models of Thai citizenship. Many survivors were likely deterred from testifying to investigators because they feared being ignored or ridiculed by authorities and the public at large. In this way, tactics of shame and violence were successful in stifling leftist organizing and public conversation about the massacre for decades after October 6th, 1976.

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<sup>153</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 55.

<sup>154</sup> Thongchai, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok*, 51.

## VI. Post-October 6th, 1976: Repercussions & Resilience

### Imprisonment

Before right-wing forces executed a coup against Prime Minister Seni Pramoj's civilian government on the evening of October 6th, more than 3,000 people were arrested in connection to the protests at Thammasat University.<sup>155</sup> Though all but thirty of these detainees were quickly made eligible for bail, many of those who were arrested remained imprisoned for up to five months because they could not produce the 1,000 baht necessary to secure their release. Waves of mass arrests continued in the months following October 6th, with an additional 8,000 people arraigned on charges related to "endangering society" or harboring communist sympathies.<sup>156</sup> Under Decree 22 of the National Administration Reform Council, which gave law enforcement the discretion to arrest and detain suspected enemies of the state without a warrant, those deemed a danger to society could be held without a trial for a renewable period of thirty days. If October 6th detainees and other prisoners of conscience were provided a trial, the proceedings occurred in military court where legal representation was prohibited for the defendants.<sup>157</sup> Amid this crackdown, it became apparent to the Thai public and to international observers that the period of popular governance and due process had come to a decisive close.

Women composed a significant proportion of those arrested, imprisoned, and exiled in the days and months after the October 6th coup. While male political prisoners were sent to Bangken prison, the Lard-Yao Youth Punishment Camp was the primary women's detention facility in Bangkok. At Lard-Yao, political prisoners mingled with the general population under

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<sup>155</sup> Coordinating Group for Religion in Society, "Human Rights in Thailand Report, April 1977," [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpQZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+04+1977+\(April\).pdf&subfolder\\_nav\\_tracking=1](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpQZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+04+1977+(April).pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1), 5.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Coordinating Group for Religion in Society, "Human Rights in Thailand Report, March 15-30 1977," [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpQZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+03+1977+\(March+15-30\).pdf&subfolder\\_nav\\_tracking=1](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpQZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+03+1977+(March+15-30).pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1), 9.

the supervision of prison officials who “had inadequate training” and fostered an atmosphere that “was serious and dull.”<sup>158</sup> Before they were released from Lard-Yao, many detainees were required to undergo re-education programs, where women were taught “be good citizens [and] to be loyal to the Nation, Religion and Monarchy.”<sup>159</sup> The state’s insistence that political prisoners at Lard-Yao undergo re-education implied that women who were active in leftist politics did not conform to the state’s gendered conception of a “good citizen.”

The trajectory of women arrested in connection to the demonstrations at Thammasat University on October 6th was distinct from that of their male peers. Most of those arrested on and in connection to October 6th were released shortly after their arrests. Some individuals, though, were charged with serious crimes like inciting a riot or harboring communist sympathies and made ineligible for bail. In the post-October 6th political climate, these charges could translate to years of incarceration. For the most part, those sentenced to lengthy prison terms were high profile figures in the student movement or leftist intelligentsia. By sentencing these mostly male leaders to years in prison, the regime sought to make an example of people like *Chaturat* magazine editor Pansak Vinyaratn and NSCT spokesman Thongchai Winichakul, figures who were recognizable to the public at large.<sup>160</sup> Women faced less legal retribution for their participation in the October 6th protests, in part because prominent women in leftist organizations were not as well-known as their male peers and because the regime underestimated women’s political capabilities. For example, one young woman, Na, who helped to found the Satjatham party, the most radical student group at Ramkhamhaeng University, noted that she was released on bail shortly after her arrest on October 6th “because she was a relatively unknown

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<sup>158</sup> Coordinating Group for Religion in Society, “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpOZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+0506+1977+\(May-June\).pdf&subfolder\\_nav\\_tracking=1](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpOZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+0506+1977+(May-June).pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1), 71.

<sup>159</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 72.

<sup>160</sup> Andelman, “Coup Driving Leftist Leaders in Thailand Into Hiding.”



student.”<sup>161</sup> The discrepancy in bail eligibility and sentencing for men and women political prisoners is illustrated by the ratio of detainees in the Bang Khen Temporary Prison, which was used to house October 6th prisoners of both genders. On December 30th of 1976, only 29 of the remaining 359 inmates in Bang Khen were women, in spite of high levels of female participation in the demonstrations at Thammasat.<sup>162</sup>

The bulk of women who remained in prison months after the first wave of October 6th arrests were not members of the student leadership or even active participants in the protests. For the most part, these women were poor and unable to post bail after they were arrested for their proximity to Thammasat on October 6th.<sup>163</sup> The Coordinating Group for Religion in Society (CGRS), a human rights monitoring group, reported that janitors, noodle vendors, and spectators were among those who “stayed in jail for almost five months” because they “could not possibly affor[d] the \$1,000 bail.”<sup>164</sup> One young woman who was caught up in the mass arrests on October 6th was Noi Kensopha, a worker in a shop on Thammasat’s campus. Making a mere 300 baht (15 USD) each month, Noi could not afford to pay bail after she was arrested alongside the student activists. After Noi’s employer bailed her out in exchange for a more exploitative contract, Noi refused to pay him back with interest and was detained again at Lard-Yao, where she remained until at least February of 1977.<sup>165</sup> Another young woman, a textile worker named Lee Hua Sae Jeer who was detained at Bang Khen, also attributed her prolonged imprisonment to her family’s “increasing economic burdens” and the fact that her mother was “too poor to bail [her] out.”<sup>166</sup> Lee Hua did not comment on the reasons for her arrest and detention, but claimed

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<sup>161</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 294.

<sup>162</sup> Coordinating Group for Religion in Society, “Human Rights in Thailand Report, December 1976-March 1977,” [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpQZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+0003+1977+\(December+1976-March+1977\).pdf&subfolder\\_nav\\_tracking=1](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpQZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+0003+1977+(December+1976-March+1977).pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1), 4.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, March 15-30 1977,” 1.

<sup>165</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, December 1976-March 1977,” 11.

<sup>166</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, December 1976-March 1977,” 9.

that she was preoccupied with her job at the Century Textile Company and not affiliated with the revolutionary movement. While some women who could not afford bail may have claimed to be apolitical in order to bolster their appeals for leniency, it is likely that many of them were in fact arrested arbitrarily and subjected to prolonged detention due to their socioeconomic status.

Women who were charged and found guilty of political crimes after October 6th were subjected to penalties that were equally as harsh as those meted out to their male peers. In the case of the “Surin Three,” a pregnant woman, Boonrern Sri-udom, was tried and sentenced to death alongside two men, her husband Pong Srichan (also referred to as Thongchan) and Sao Sao Kaew.<sup>167</sup> The three were arrested in a clash with police on June 23rd, 1976 after which they confessed to being communist insurgents who had received “military training with guerillas in the forest.”<sup>168</sup> Although the circumstances of the groups’ confessions were unsound (a fourth suspect with whom the Surin Three were arrested was tortured to death en route to the police station), the nature of the confession limited the defendants’ avenues for legal appeal. In April of 1977, while detained at the Women Punishment Centre, Boonrern gave birth to a child.<sup>169</sup> A month later, on June 15th, Boonrern and her co-defendants were sentenced to death.<sup>170</sup>

Boonrern may have been the sole high-profile female defendant sentenced to death during the 1977 period, but she was not the only political detainee to be pregnant or to give birth in prison during this time. Yau-varat Charan-yanon, a teacher who was arrested for committing “Treason in the Kingdom” while participating in a protest against police corruption and an unlicensed mini-bus company, was made bail eligible solely to deliver her child.<sup>171</sup> In February

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<sup>167</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 1.

<sup>168</sup> Coordinating Group for Religion in Society, “Human Rights in Thailand Report, July-August 1977,” [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpOZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+0708+1977+\(July-August\).pdf&subfolder\\_nav\\_tracking=1](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/72sxbnrhsi3q686/AAAFghWqteGxpOZhUqLxpNVda/1977?dl=0&preview=HRTR+0708+1977+(July-August).pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1), 10.

<sup>169</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, July-August 1977,” 11

<sup>170</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 1.

<sup>171</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 75.

of 1977, yet another woman was bailed out by CGRS who “helped her find a hospital so that she could deliver her child.”<sup>172</sup> Although, as previously mentioned, separate prison facilities did exist for women, it is evident that considerations specific to women’s health or childcare were not a priority in detention centers where political prisoners were held. Women were held to similar standards as their male peers in sentencing and detention itself, but the consequences could be more severe for those who shouldered greater responsibilities in terms of pregnancy and child-care.

The stories of detainees who were caught up in the alleged anti-communist campaign provide insight into how women viewed themselves as political actors in the 1970s. An especially rich account of agency and political perspective comes from Pimparn Poo-vapanth, a woman from Surin Province who was the wife of a former politician.<sup>173</sup> After a search of her home on October 22nd, 1976, during which police seized copies of the leftist *Chaturat* and *Prachachat* magazines, Pimparn was arrested on the charge of “endangering society.” For the next four months, Pimparn was detained at a local police station and denied the right to a trial or representation. She was then transferred to and held at the Lard-Yao women’s prison, in Bangkok, until May 11, 1977<sup>174</sup> for a total of “[s]ix months and eighteen days of detention without any apparent guilt at all,” according to Pimparn herself.<sup>175</sup> At first glance Pimparn’s case looks similar to that of the countless others who were arrested on arbitrary charges in highly policed rural areas. Pimparn insisted that she was detained as retaliation for her husband’s leftist leanings.<sup>176</sup> However, the official statement regarding Pimparn’s arrest accused her of taking a

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<sup>172</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, December 1976-March 1977,” 2.

<sup>173</sup> Pimparn (also spelled Pim Porn in several documents) is an alias for the woman, who preferred to remain anonymous in the records of the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society.

<sup>174</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 49.

<sup>175</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 67.

<sup>176</sup> Pimparn’s husband was Suthee Poo-vapanth, a former member of the National Parliament who was detained from 1967-1971 on the charge of promoting communism. See “Human Rights in Thailand Report, March 15-30,” 6.

direct role in politics, by coordinating “a demonstration of discontented farmers,” bailing out arrested farmers, and acting as a liaison between agricultural workers and the government officers of Surin.<sup>177</sup>

It is tempting to dismiss the official rationale for Pimparn’s arrest as a series of false accusations necessary to justify her prolonged detention. However, in a letter to CGRS, Pimparn admitted that she participated in the political activities she was charged with. Pimparn confirmed that she acted as an intermediary between discontented farmers and political representatives, writing, “[I would] take [farmer’s] complaints and hand them to my husband; or if I saw that the problems could be solved by the local officials, I would help the complainers get in touch with them.”<sup>178</sup> Although she denied the charge that she incited a riot, Pimparn also acknowledged that she “led the native people to the Nai Amphur (Head of the District) to ask for justice” in an effort to advocate for rural land reform.<sup>179</sup> Given Pimparn’s leadership in rural advocacy movements and her self-professed role as “vice-president of a political party,” her denial of political activism may have been a form of legal defense.<sup>180</sup> However, Pimparn seems to genuinely believe that she was not only wrongfully accused of posing a “danger to society” but also that she was not politically active in any fashion that would warrant her arrest.

Despite evidence that Pimparn was an outspoken participant in campaigns that addressed rural grievances, she frames herself not as an independent actor, but as a “housewife who is simply interested in politics and events of the country.”<sup>181</sup> Here, Pimparn may be appealing to traditional expectations for gendered conduct, according to which politics could be only an interest, not a primary occupation, for women. Perhaps Pimparn believed that presenting herself

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 69.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 68.

<sup>181</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 67.

as a passive victim who was only tangentially involved in rural politics, rather than a leftist activist, would allow her to garner sympathy with state officials and Western human rights groups like CGRS. Though Pimparn's words hint that politics and activism were nothing more than a pastime, her actions after her arrest demonstrate ongoing resistance to state-enforced norms of compliance and civility. Pimparn obstinately insisted on better prison conditions, even starting a successful "soup rebellion" to demand higher quality cookware. So vocal was Pimparn that the head officer of her detention facility told a reporter, "We cannot release her because she talks too much."<sup>182</sup> Pimparn also refused to comply with re-education programs, which attempted to indoctrinate women prisoners in alignment with the regime's interests. Noncompliance, self-advocacy, and independent thought, qualities which Pimparn and other female activists exhibited, were considered incompatible with the gendered characteristics of "good citizens" that the regime sought to instill.

### **Economic Fallout**

Though imprisonment in the aftermath of the October 6th crackdown impacted a subsection of Thai women, many more women, including those who did not participate in the student or labor movements, faced indirect but equally debilitating repercussions. One of the greatest impediments described by women in the months that followed October 6th was the economic burden that resulted from the long-term incarceration of close family members. This financial fallout was often worsened in rural areas where people were unable to participate in agriculture because their community was paralyzed by combat between the state and CPT.

Months after the initial arrests of October 6th detainees, the government embarked on a sweeping anti-communist campaign in "sensitive" rural areas that were associated with high

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<sup>182</sup> "Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977," 70.

levels of insurgent activity. Empowered by Decree 22, authorities detained thousands of individuals for indefinite periods of time on the vague and all-encompassing charge of “endangering society.” Accusations of “endangering society” were meted out indiscriminately for actions including listening to a particular radio station or provoking the ire of a drunken police officer. Accordingly, many arrests for endangering society in these “sensitive areas” implicated peasants and ordinary villagers rather than insurgents. In May of 1977, CGRS reported that “[o]ften almost whole villages seem to be hauled in for interrogation and ‘re-education’” and that no records were being kept for this category of prisoner, allowing the government to act with impunity.<sup>183</sup> Even if women themselves were not caught in the net of these mass arrests, there was a high likelihood that they had a brother, husband, or son who was.

Although rural women were economically active, they struggled to shoulder the dual burdens of childrearing and labor without the financial support of a partner. Thus, when men in outlying provinces were arrested en masse, many women lost the income they relied on to sustain their large families. The records of CGRS indicate that financial assistance was one of the greatest needs of families who were affected by incarceration in the aftermath of October 6th. For instance, when Phongrsri Kaengkaew’s husband was arrested and transferred from their village in Surin Province to the Bangkaen detention center, in Bangkok, she became the sole income earner for her six children, who were too young to work, and fell into 1,000 baht of debt.<sup>184</sup>

Women like Phongrsi, who were previously scraping by, found it nearly impossible to evade poverty after their husbands were arrested. Similar to Phongrsri, Sum-arng Kamoldej, a woman from an incredibly remote village in Isan, lived in “a small poverty-stricken cottage”

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<sup>183</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 2.

<sup>184</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, April 1977,” 12.

where she owned “a small piece of land where insufficient rice [was] produced to meet the needs of the family.”<sup>185</sup> After Sum-arng’s husband was arrested and transferred to Bangkok, she could no longer sustain their family and “since she was going to have a baby at that time she went to stay with her parents.”<sup>186</sup> Sum-arng was relatively lucky. Many women did not have family members upon whom they could rely for financial support. Writing to local authorities on March 16, 1977, Muay Mai-tri-chit lamented that even with her husband’s contributions her family was “one amongst the poorest in [her] village.”<sup>187</sup> With the arbitrary arrest of her husband, over a confrontation started by a police officer, Muay noted that she and her children were left “to face a cruel fate of extreme poverty which tortures [their] minds and bodies to an extent that the rich can never experience in their lives.”<sup>188</sup> Due to the gendered division of labor and an absence of social support, women who were not behind bars felt the effects of the post-October 6th political crackdown much like their incarcerated counterparts.

### **Advocacy & Everyday Agency**

Women whose husbands, brothers, or sons were imprisoned were not passive witnesses. In many instances, women monitored prison conditions, drew public attention to injustice, and advocated for amnesty on behalf of their loved ones. When Jean Sangsakul, a journalist who worked for two local newspapers, was arrested on charges of being a “danger to society,” his wife visited him on a daily basis until she found him missing from the detention center.<sup>189</sup> Rather than taking the police’s assurances that Jean had been released at face value, Jean’s wife spoke with people living adjacent to the detention center and learned that her husband had been escorted into the jungle by armed guards. Jean’s wife went to the editors of the *SiangRath* and

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<sup>185</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 33.

<sup>186</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 34.

<sup>187</sup> “Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977,” 60.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Jean’s wife is unnamed in available records. See “Human Rights in Thailand Report, March 15-30, 1977,” 5.

Muang Tai papers, for whom Jean had worked, to publicize his story.<sup>190</sup> When these publications did not respond regarding Jean's case, his wife persisted and commanded the attention of human rights groups such as the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society (CGRS).

In addition to communicating with human rights groups and watchdogs, women appealed directly to state representatives, demanding explanations from local officials and insisting on their loved ones' innocence. Sum-arng was one such woman from a remote village in Nakhon Rachasima province. When Sum-arng's husband, Su-poln Kamoldeg, was arrested for possessing a tape-recorder with leftist conscientization songs, she confronted the head official of her district about what she called his "unjust" arrest.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, writing to a local official on March 16, 1977, a young mother named Muay Mai-tri-chit asked that the state "please grant [her husband] a release on bail so that he will be able to prove his innocence and the truth of his being framed and persecuted."<sup>192</sup> Invoking the language of rights and justice, which had become more commonplace during the democratic period, these women were unafraid to speak up against local authorities and to check the state's ability to act with impunity. It can be argued that so many women effectively drew attention to the conditions under which political prisoners were being held that the state was forced to implement a new policy of relocating prisoners from their homes. In April of 1977, CGRS observed that a "pattern of moving 'endangering society' prisoners from one part of the country to another distant part seems to be the common practice. In this way local people can never know how many of their friends are still arrested."<sup>193</sup> This change in the practice of detaining political prisoners can be at least partially attributed to women's roles in monitoring prison conditions and decrying prolonged or arbitrary detention.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> "Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977," 34.

<sup>192</sup> "Human Rights in Thailand Report, May-June 1977," 61.

<sup>193</sup> "Human Rights in Thailand Report, April 1977," 11.



The scope of post-October 6th investigations meant that those who were unaffiliated with the student movement were often pulled into the fray of the anti-communist crackdown. Even women who were ideologically opposed to leftist intellectualism, such as Panida Worrawong, played a significant role in advocating for loved ones who were subjected to state suppression. Though Panida met her husband, Sawad Intarat, when the pair were students at the Teacher's Training College in Chiang Mai, she did not support leftist politics and she opposed Sawad's activism, which led to his imprisonment shortly after October 6th.<sup>194</sup> Nonetheless, when it was rumored that Sawad had been arrested, Panida set fire to two boxes of her husband's books, including the revolutionary writings of Che Guevara, to destroy evidence of his socialist sympathies. Panida demanded that a local army commander help locate her husband in prison, asserting that "[i]f he [was] not dead, [she was] going to see how he [was]."<sup>195</sup> When she did find Sawad, Panida was enraged to discover him malnourished and living in cramped quarters. Panida then successfully appealed to prison officials for improved conditions. Women like Panida did not shy away from confrontation with state and prison authorities in the aftermath of October 6th. Yet, Panida's complex relationship to her husband's leftist politics also affirms that highly educated women in Thailand were not a monolith. Many women were not drawn to the student movement, but their aversion to leftist politics did not mean that they conformed to stereotypes that portrayed women as meek bystanders. Women such as Muay, Sum-arng, and Panida were representative of actors across rural/urban and class divides who were likely emboldened by the discourse of the democratic period and thus more willing to push back against the government.

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<sup>194</sup> Pseudonym used in Panida Worrawong, "Interview with Panida Worrawong," by Phianphachong Intarat, *Reconceptualizing the Cold War: On-the-ground Experiences in Asia*, National University of Singapore, February 17, 2021, <https://rcw-asia.com/browsearchives/interview-with-panida-worrawong>.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

## Communist Insurgency & Escape to the Jungle

To avoid arrest and to resist the post-coup authoritarian government, many university students and leftist activists fled Bangkok and other cities to join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the dense jungles of Southern Thailand. Though the CPT failed to exert considerable influence on the student movement during the bulk of the 1973-1976 period, the CPT was the only group to whom the students could turn after the October 6th coup closed mainstream political channels to popular organizing. A source in the Thai Police Department estimated that between several hundred and three thousand students, who previously did not identify as communist, participated in the CPT's insurgent movement in the months and years after October 6th.<sup>196</sup> Students and intellectuals who participated in the exodus to the jungle were radicalized by the regime's violence, seeing the CPT as the only viable vessel for egalitarian ideals which would otherwise be suppressed in the post-coup political environment.

Even American officials, who were at the height of waging a Cold War containment policy in Southeast Asia, did not see the student movement of the early 1970s and the democratic government it brought to power as linked to a legitimate communist threat.<sup>197</sup> By 1977, however, state violence had forced the students and their allies into the outstretched arms of the CPT. Writing to her parents in August of 1977, an anonymous university graduate framed her decision to abandon a comfortable life in Bangkok for the communist insurgency as a matter of both principle and pragmatism. As she reflected on her commitment to human dignity and elevating the status of the rural poor, this woman told her parents that she had "gone to practice these principles in real life."<sup>198</sup> So fixed was this woman's support for her ideals that she expressed a

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<sup>196</sup> Morell and Chaianan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 293.

<sup>197</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, "Memorandum For: The President," Oct 15, 1976, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d375>.

<sup>198</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 298.

willingness to “sacrifice [her] life if necessary for the revolutionary liberation of our nation and our people.”<sup>199</sup> Her radicalization was not uncommon among students who were initially unaffiliated with the CPT. After the October 6th massacre, the students fled to the jungles “full of bitterness in [their] hearts” and determined to avenge their peers.<sup>200</sup> For these students, the communist insurgency was a last resort, the only remaining avenue for resisting an oppressive military state. The author of the August 1977 letter is forthright about this fact stating, “We didn’t have anyone from whom we could seek help except the people’s armed forces under the leadership of the Communist Party of Thailand.”<sup>201</sup> By boxing relatively liberal, though left-learning, students into a corner, right-wing militants had (at least nominally) turned the students into the very thing they feared most - communists.

As members of the CPT, former students and activists defied the gendered social and behavioral expectations held by the state they left behind. The CPT defector referenced above is conscious that she defied her parents’ expectations, stating, “Undoubtedly, you are blaming yourselves, feeling that you failed to raise your daughter in a good way, making me what I am today.”<sup>202</sup> From this statement, it can be interpreted that the normative expectations for a “good daughter” did not include overt political activity and certainly excluded outright armed resistance to the regime. Yet, rather than seeing herself through the lens of her parents and the society in which they were socialized, this young woman paints herself as complying with a new standard of morality and good citizenship. She insists that the activists and insurgents are fighting for, rather than against, the nation and its people and implores her parents to “[b]e proud of yourselves, and of the ideas which have persuaded your daughter to move forward to do great

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 298-299.

<sup>202</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 298.

work by ceasing to be a selfish person.”<sup>203</sup> In part because of the scarcity of human resources, this woman was held to similar standards as her male peers, “exercising, running, and receiving military training every morning,” rather than cordoned into gendered-segregated roles in support of the Communist campaign.<sup>204</sup> With the CPT, then, this woman was empowered to break from the expectations of traditional Thai society and to participate in a new political reality where she could be assertive, independent, and even violent, yet still a model citizen.<sup>205</sup>

Unlike this anonymous letter, most of the available accounts of the CPT insurgency were composed by high profile male leaders, many of whom became respected and powerful figures in politics or academia after taking advantage of amnesty laws in the 1980s. The revisionist narrative of the post-1976 student revolutionaries drew primarily from these accounts and lauded “the outstanding young men [who] went to the hills” without creating space for their female counterparts.<sup>206</sup> In reality, there was not a singular archetype of an activist turned insurgent. Men and women from a range of occupations, academic disciplines, and economic backgrounds fled to rural areas and participated in CPT activities during the late 1970s. Chiranan Pitpreecha, a former pharmacy student at Chulalongkorn University and the daughter of wealthy merchants, was one of many relatively affluent students who had never before dreamed of carrying a weapon in combat or sleeping on the jungle floor. Prominent academics and intellectuals, too, joined the insurgency often following public announcements that were designed to inspire solidarity. Chonthira Satayawatana Kladyu, a highly influential literary critic and lecturer at Chulalongkorn, was one notable example of an esteemed figure who joined the CPT’s armed

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 299.

<sup>205</sup> Although the CPT offered women a new model of Thai citizenship, it should be noted that female insurgents were not, for the most part, asserting their femininity or recasting traditionally ‘feminine qualities’ as the mark of a good citizen. With the CPT, women were typically subsumed under a gender-neutral, but patriarchally-derived conception of citizenship that required them to take on or aspire to traditionally masculine qualities.

<sup>206</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 291.

struggle “in order to achieve justice in Thai society.”<sup>207</sup> Female defectors to the CPT came from a variety of religious backgrounds, as well. One 25 year old student in the Faculty of Education at Ramkhamhaeng University, referred to as Na, described herself as “a pious Muslim” who was “neither poor nor rich,” having grown up in a middle class family with a single mother.<sup>208</sup> Throughout the earlier 1970s, Na’s belief in Islam decreased, so much so that she “went to the hills to join the revolution” and the atheist communist forces shortly after October 6th.<sup>209</sup>

For many women like Chiranan, Na, and Chonthira, joining the CPT was the culmination of processes of politicalization that began in at least the 1960s and escalated during the heightened activism of the revolutionary period. Historians like Chai-anan Samudavanija and David Morell express the viewpoint that “[I]like other bright young women in the late 1960s, Chonthira was basically apolitical,” focusing on her study of literature at Chulalongkorn University’s School of the Arts.<sup>210</sup> According to Morell and Chai-anan’s interpretation, as a university student in the 1960s, Chonthira complied with conventional expectations for women in Thailand, pursuing “modern” goals through higher education, but without a clear interest in politics, which was still seen as a primarily male domain. It was amid the revolutionary fervor of October 14, 1973 that Chonthira’s work first became politically oriented. Chonthira began writing books and poems which were geared towards an audience of leftist students and amplified their demands for structural reform. Over time, Chonthira adopted a Marxist outlook, becoming increasingly radical alongside several sects of the student population. In 1975, Chonthira criticized her university colleagues for being “liberal, soft-minded bourgeois individuals,” signaling the apex of a profound transformation in her political persona.

Chonthira’s evolution from a “politically uninvolved intellectual to a committed Thai Marxist”

<sup>207</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 302.

<sup>208</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 293.

<sup>209</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 294.

<sup>210</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 301.

would have been unthinkable in earlier decades, when a woman working in a male-dominated field like higher education needed to carefully comply with prevailing behavioral and ideological norms.<sup>211</sup>

Like Chonthira, Chiranan was not initially attracted to politics. As a first-year student, Chiranan was chosen as Chulalongkorn University's queen in the type of beauty pageant that she would later decry as a proponent of the women's liberation movement. By the time of the popular uprising, however, Chiranan became a student leader at Chulalongkorn, producing poems and other texts that were widely circulated within the leftist movement. After October 14, 1973, Chiranan became an "unofficial spokeswoman for the radical movement on women's issues."<sup>212</sup> Chiranan's advocacy for gender rights did not cause her to become sidelined within the student movement. Rather, many activists learned Chiranan's writings and "golden phrases" by heart. Chiranan's thinking on gender also influenced one of the foremost student leaders at Thammasat, Seksan Prasertkul, who later became her husband. In Chiranan's poems from the post-1976 period she focuses more explicitly on gender, painting women as key political actors in poems like "The Defiance of a Flower."<sup>213</sup>

Na's political involvement followed a similar trajectory, accelerating as the student movement and democratic period progressed. When she first joined a seminar group where student leaders like Seksan discussed pressing social and economic issues Na had very little knowledge of political organizing. At the time, Na worked with a Student Volunteers Group to conduct outreach in slums throughout Bangkok, but she did not necessarily see the political implications of the poverty she encountered. After actively participating in the popular uprising

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, *The Rise of the Octobrists in Contemporary Thailand: Power and Conflict among Former Left-Wing Student Activists in Thai Politics*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2016, 64.

<sup>213</sup> Chiranan Pitpreecha, "The Defiance of a Flower," <https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems/defiance-flower>.

Na went on to participate in rural mobilization campaigns and ran as a student union candidate for the Satjatham party, which eventually became one of the most radical leftist groups at Ramkhamhaeng University.<sup>214</sup> When Na was released after her arrest at Thammasat on October 6th, she saw joining the revolutionary cause of the CPT as a logical next step. The radicalization of Na, a young Muslim woman from a family of modest means, was an unquestionable departure from historical patterns of socialization.

Na, Chiranan, and Chonthira are but a few of the women representing a cross-section of the population who were pushed into the open arms of the Communist Party of Thailand by the October 6th massacre. While a decade prior women's participation in a radical group like the CPT might have been unthinkable in Thailand, by 1976, women's political activism had become normalized by reformers who attempted to rewrite the cultural script for a "good citizen." Though the CPT was ultimately not aligned with the mission of many activists, who surrendered to state authorities and, later, eagerly accepted amnesty agreements that were extended in the early 1980s, women who left their entire livelihoods behind for the jungles in the post-1976 period asserted their autonomy, determined to seek out alternatives to state authority when it was no longer in accord with their ideals.

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<sup>214</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 294.

## VII. Conclusion

During the nearly three years of democratic governance in Thailand, the nation experienced an outpouring of participatory activity which created openings for groups that were previously relegated to the political margins. Though unprecedented in a country where submission to the monarchy and military was the historical norm, the events of October 14, 1973 did not necessarily come as a surprise to those familiar with the growth of student politics in Thailand. For years prior to the popular uprising, students led a highly coordinated campaign to bring farmers, urban workers, and other excluded groups into the political orbit. Through their partnerships with rural communities and the urban working class, student activists broadened the realm of possibility for disenfranchised populations, encouraging them to engage in protests, boycotts, and other consciousness-raising activities. Though the language of solidarity and inclusion employed by the student movement did not speak specifically to women, instead prioritizing class solidarity, it was effective at bringing women into the political process and setting the stage for future gender equality campaigns. The student movement's influence at the intersection of class and gender advocacy was particularly evident in the garment industry, where the politics of protest and labor organizing were primarily dictated by women.

The space that the student movement created for women's participation in politics was reinforced in the field of law, which emerged as a new frontier for women's advocacy during the democratic period. Inscribing equality of the sexes in the Constitution of 1974 not only created opportunities for women in new professions, it also normalized the concept of gender equality, fostering public awareness of women's rights and their importance. Though long-standing cultural norms regarding gender difference persisted in practice, the women who made Section



28 of the Constitution possible helped to destabilize previously uncontested notions of women's subservience as objects rather than subjects of the law.

Violence inflicted on women at Thammasat University in October 1976 had far reaching effects for women's political advocacy and the egalitarian project of the democratic period. By committing acts of gendered violence in a public space, where photographs of the atrocity would be taken and disseminated, the perpetrators of the October 6th massacre intended to terrorize their political enemies. The mostly male attackers and onlookers singled out women for sexualized violence and enacted their "conquest over femininity" with impunity. Media coverage of the October 6th massacre shamed rather than sympathizing with the women victimized, sending a message to the Thai people that those who broke from conventions dictated by the military-aligned and predominantly male state would be disciplined and made to pay for their insubordination. Though the level of violence on October 6th was unique in its scope and severity, the massacre was part of a larger right-wing campaign to dehumanize female activists and their male counterparts. Perpetrators of the massacre sought to cement the perception that women involved in politics were failing to meet the gendered expectations for Thai citizens and thus undeserving of the respect or dignity afforded to the *kulasatri*.

By painting student protesters and their allies as innately un-Thai because of their political views, the perpetrators of violence on October 6th were able to limit opposition in the wake of the massacre, suppressing alternative perspectives and public discussion of October 6th for years to come. The massacre had an especially harmful effect on the discourse around women's equality and led many female political activists to become demoralized and disillusioned with public-facing advocacy. In the face of strict censorship, only "strains of liberal feminism that were accommodating to Thai nationalism" survived the massacre.<sup>215</sup> Soon after the

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<sup>215</sup> Sudarat, "Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence," 185.

post-October 6th coup, incarceration, exile, and surveillance of leftist political leaders and ordinary people who fell under suspicion of “endangering society” or harboring “communist sympathies” caused the *samprasan* coalition to disintegrate. In the absence of formidable political pressure in defense of democratic reforms, many of the institutional and legal advances made by working class women and students were rolled back by the post-October 6th regime. An official investigation of October 6th would not occur until twenty years after the massacre, when it was too late to hold many of the perpetrators accountable for their actions. To this day there is no official record of sexual crimes committed during the massacre.

Nonetheless, Thai women did not wilt in the face of state suppression. With a “constant flame,” described in Chiranan Pitpreecha’s “The Defiance of a Flower,” Thai women continued to assert their humanity, increasingly drawing on the language of human rights and equality to critique the post-1976 suppression of leftist activism. Even as women were subjected to prolonged detention and the economic fallout from mass arrests or political violence, they found ways to provide for their families and leveraged the academic or political experience they had gained during the period of popular governance. These women did not receive recognition equal to that enjoyed by their high-profile male peers. Yet, through their everyday resilience, women impacted by the post-October 6th anti-communist campaigns actualized many of the democratic movement's ideals. By writing letters to local officials, monitoring prison conditions, or simply finding a way to survive amid political suppression and unfavorable economic conditions, ordinary women contributed to the work “necessary for the revolutionary liberation of [the Thai] nation and [its] people” and laid the foundation for a more equitable society.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, 298.

## VIII. Epilogue: The Octobrists Pass the Torch

After being cracked open in 1973, the door to Thai politics was abruptly slammed shut to women, other subaltern actors, and the public at large on October 6th, 1976. However, the right-wing anti-communist campaign did not altogether quash women's voices. Women continued to make space for themselves in Thailand's political and economic spheres as attorneys, workers, students, farmers, local or national representatives, and even armed insurgents. Though women's achievements in the late twentieth-century did not receive much public recognition, small acts of female defiance and agency amounted to substantive change. By the 1990s, though women's equal rights were not fully secured, conversations about gender equality had gained traction in Thai academic and legal circles. With the passage of the 1995 Constitution and the 'People's Constitution' of 1997, Thailand's laws once again expressed a clear commitment to democratic principles, including equality on the basis of gender.<sup>217</sup>

The dialogue surrounding political change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century wasn't expressly linked to the popular uprising or the reforms embodied in the Constitution of 1974. However, the legacy of the democratic period could be seen in the makeup of the constitutional drafting committees in the late 1990s, which included many advocates and legal scholars who were students, leftist intellectuals, or protesters during the 1970s. These individuals and other members of the "Octobrist" generation continued to rise to prominence in Thai political, economic, and intellectual circles after they were granted amnesty in the early 1980s. Today the Octobrists boast significant cultural capital and, much like in the 1970s, their voices shape the realm of political possibility in Thailand. Most notably, the Octobrists can be credited for helping to effect a shift towards embracing the rhetoric of populism and human

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<sup>217</sup> Suteera Thomson and Maytinee Bhongsvej, "Women Reshaping the Society: A Challenge for the Remaining Decade," Gender and Development Research Institute (April 1995); Duncan McCargo ed., *Reforming Thai Politics*. Copenhagen: Nias Pub., 2002.

rights, including principles of gender equality. Though the egalitarian ideals of the student movement have not been fully realized, they are normalized in the contemporary Thai discourse and constitute a remarkable shift from the pre-1973 perception of politics as an elite endeavor. The contributions of female Octobrists like Usa Lertsrisanthat, Chiranan Pitpreecha, Wanida Tantiwittayapitak, Sucheela Tanchainan, and many others, are also visible in academia, law, and the NGO sector, where the gender gap has been significantly narrowed.<sup>218</sup>

When pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in Thailand beginning in early 2020, women were once again on the front lines, but this time, they not only composed the majority of protesters, they were also at the leading the charge as some of the earliest and most outspoken organizers. As the face of many human rights and grassroots political organizations, Thai women brought gender-specific issues to the national stage alongside their calls for government reform. In their resistance to patriarchal institutions including the military and the monarchy, women recognize that their goals are different from those of previous male-dominated democracy movements. However, this paper has shown that assertions by demonstrators such as current Thammasat university student Jutatip Sirikhan that “[u]ntil now, Thailand has not had a gender political movement” are somewhat misleading.<sup>219</sup> Although women participating in the activism of the 1970s may not have consciously or cohesively advanced the cause of gender equality, they laid the groundwork for university students who now have greater access to the language, organizing tactics, and legal instruments necessary for demanding women’s liberation.

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<sup>218</sup> To learn more about these women activists and other Octobrists see Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, *The Rise of the Octobrists in Contemporary Thailand: Power and Conflict among Former Left-Wing Student Activists in Thai Politics*, 167-178.

<sup>219</sup> Hannah Beech and Muktitia Suhartono, “Young Women Take a Frontline Role in Thailand’s Protests,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/world/asia/thailand-protests-women.html>.



*Figure 6. Young women demonstrating as part of an August 2020 rally at Democracy Monument in Bangkok raise the three finger signal of defiance as part of anti-government demonstrations.*

Journalists and society at large are beginning to recognize that current movements for gender equality and democracy are “two sides of the same coin” and part of a Thai tradition of women’s advocacy, albeit a tradition that has been overshadowed by historians’ focus on male-dominated institutions.<sup>220</sup> The connections that current pro-democracy demonstrators make to Octobrist activism show that the popular uprising of 1973 was not an inexplicable rupture. Rather, it was linked to ongoing expressions of agency by historical actors, including women, who are understudied and often forgotten in research on Thailand’s political evolution. Amid a resurgent interest in the history of the popular uprising and other forms of political resistance in Thailand, it is important that women’s voices do not continue to be sidelined. Armed with the experiences and knowledge of earlier generations of women activists, young people will be better equipped to defy stereotypes of feminine fragility and exercise defiance as they chip away at residual barriers to civil rights and gender equality.

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<sup>220</sup> Sirin and Chia, “The Struggle for Democracy and the Struggle for Women’s Rights are One and the Same.”

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