

Thailand:

Indigenous Women & Political Participation

Rights and Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Hmong and Karen Communities, Northern Thailand

that *'nine moons do not compare to one sun'* – meaning that nine women are not as important as one man.

Gender inequality remains a large problem among Indigenous communities in Northern Thailand. It is reflected in state and non-state political structures and political participation that are not welcoming to women's voices and prioritise those of men.

What is Political Participation?

This research among Hmong and Karen peoples is part of a movement that strives for indigenous women's participation in local political activity at, but not limited to, the sub-district administration organization (SAO) where they: gain knowledge of basic rights and Thai civics; participate in voting; have an interest in politics; participate in the establishment of groups that support and promote women; voice political opinions; and join in policy advocacy.

Barriers to Political Participation

Research survey data from two villages in Chiang Rai Province shows that while 67% of people know about citizens' rights and duties in elections, there are cultural, structural and knowledge barriers to their participation in

community group, SAO). The main barriers to participation are:

- The belief held by 52% of surveyed men and women that women cannot be leaders
- Lack of understanding of civil politics and duties within democracy (11% know about citizens' rights and duties in wider Thai democracy; and 13% know about Citizens' rights and duties at the local level, in the Sub-District Administration Organization (SAO))
- Family influence on decisions about political participation (57% of those surveyed said families were involved in their decisions related to political activity)
- Lack of awareness of the training on gender equality and human rights available from the LAO (2% know of SAO training opportunities)
- Lack of understanding of the role and authority of the SAO (15% know about SAO policies and its role)

In June 2013 only 1 indigenous (Karen) woman was a SAO council member. After recent elections there are 4 female members, none indigenous. Hmong women have not been recent members.



Indigenous Women in Huay E-Kang discussing about the plan of the research

About the Research Programme

The feminist participatory action research for this brief was conducted by the Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand (IWNT) from June-November 2013 in in Ban Huay E-kang Village and Ban Pa Pai Villages in Mae Wang District, Chiang Mai Province. IWNT conducted the research with women from Karen and Hmong communities.

This research is part of APWLD's FPAR Programme in 8 countries.

Women's Initiatives

In both research communities, women have organised themselves into women's groups that give them a certain autonomy from men. Both Ba Pai and Huay E Kang women's groups have large participation, and Huay E Kang also has a women's savings group and a child care group. Importantly, all groups can feed information into the main community meetings and decision making processes.

These women's groups provide mentoring or support formembers and non-members, eg accompanying Indigenous women to the local hospital where they may face racial and gender discrimination.

IWNT & APWLD Rural and Indigenous Women Claiming Rights: Thailand



Local researcher team in action: completing the survey

Hmong Cultural Structure Affecting Gender Equality

The Hmong Indigenous people are generally a male dominant society. After marriage, a woman will be called 'a wife of her husband' and limited in making friends. Married men have no responsibilities for household work. After divorce, separation or widowhood, women cannot return to their families, under the belief that they are cut off and the ancestor spirit will no longer protect them. In many Hmong villages, there is no legal recognition of married women's right to a share of property or land. Hmong women have no right to participate in community decision making. Most feel forced to accept this, under the threat of being cut off from society if they do not.

Karen Cultural Structure Affecting Gender Equality

In Karen communities men move to their wives' homes (and under the protection of her ancestor spirit) after marriage. In the case of an affair, he must perform an apology ceremony to the wife's ancestor spirit. On a less positive note, a wife has to give her apology to her husband once a year. In the case of divorce, both parties can go back to parental homes. Within the family, a woman can raise and share her own opinion with her husband informally. As a result of these, Karen women tend to have higher levels of economic and political participation.

Women in the Sub-District Administration Organisation (LAO)

Increased support is needed for women in politics. When Indigenous women have been LAO members, research shows that there was not adequate support or gender sensitisation for the woman member to be effective as an advocate for women's rights

Changes - in Discussion with Men

In previous pushes for women's rights, some men in indigenous communities felt alienated or threatened by women's rights discourse. In some indigenous communities it is appropriate to invite and involve men to discussions on gender and women's articulation of their rights, especially as rights within the Indigenous Peoples movement

The men are walking much faster than us. They just have to understand that our legs need to get stronger, and then we, men and women, can walk better together. P Naoaerii

Sub-District Women's Development Plans

Sub-District Administration Organizations (LAOs) have 3-year women's development plans. Indigenous women do not have sufficient participation in the design and implementation of these. The current LAO development plan in Mae Win runs from B.E.2557-2561(2014-2018). The plan includes elements, which if properly implemented with women's participation would better the state of women's political participation at the local level:

- Promotion of women's groups and development projects
- Promotion of people's participation in the LAO
- Capacity development project for community organisations
- Training on basic rights, duties and laws
- Project promoting democratic politics
- Women's group capacity development project

Changes Needed/Policy Recommendations

- **LAOs**, particularly the Mae Win LAO and others in Indigenous communities, **must support women on the executive and in the council.**
- **LAOs must work to ensure Indigenous women's participation in the design and implementation of women's development plans.**
- **Accountability and monitoring mechanisms need to be established** to ensure women's development plans are carried through and that women are fully participating in the LAO.
- **LAO staff and councillors need to be made more aware of their role** with respect to advancing Indigenous women's rights.