Women in Politics in Thailand

Kazuki Iwanaga*

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*Kazuki Iwanaga is senior lecturer in political science at Halmstad University. He was a visiting professor at the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University, Bangkok, 2002.

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Abstract

In Thailand, as in most other Asian countries, politics has traditionally been a male preserve. Compared to men, women have not been visible in governance and politics. Although Thailand was among the first Asian countries to grant the right to vote to women, after almost seven and a half decades' of slow, incremental gains for women in politics, the representation of women remains no more than a blip on a political landscape dominated by men. There is still little analysis on the participation of women in politics at various levels of government in Thailand and research to date is fragmentary. However, interest in this field is growing in light of the development of democracy with the introduction of the new constitution in 1997, as well as changes in civil society. In this paper, the case of Thailand is used to achieve three main objectives. First, the position and advancement of women in the Thai parliament will be analyzed in order to contribute to research on women's political representation in the developing world. Second, the case of Thailand will be used to test some of the assumptions and theories developed in the advanced industrialized democracies of Europe and North America concerning the impact of women in public office. Third, the major barriers facing the entrance of women into the national parliament in Thailand will be examined to see whether the Thai case is consistent with research findings on women and politics in industrial democracies of the West.

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Introduction*

With the arrival of the 21st century, the goal of gender parity throughout the world remains unfulfilled, and particularly so in the political arena. Despite some progress made in various parts of Asia, the ability of women to participate as policymakers in the political process remains limited. In Thailand, as in most other Asian countries, politics has traditionally been a male preserve. Compared to men, women have not been visible in governance and politics. Although Thailand was among the first Asian countries to grant the right to vote to women, after almost seven and a half decades' of slow, incremental gains for women in politics, the representation of women remains no more than a blip on the political landscape dominated by men. Women have a long way to go before reaching the critical mass needed to produce women-oriented policies. Since women are grossly underrepresented in political bodies, the interests of women are not adequately represented in the legislature or in government. As a result, the country is deprived of the benefits, which accrue from women's expertise and experiences.

There is still little analysis on the participation of women in politics at various levels of government in Thailand and research to date is fragmentary. However, interest in this field is growing in light of the development of democracy with the introduction of the new constitution in 1997, as well as changes in civil society. In this paper, the case of Thailand is used to achieve three main objectives. First, the position and advancement of women in the Thai parliament will be analyzed in order to contribute to research on women's political representation in the developing world. Second, the case of Thailand will be used to test some of the assumptions and theories developed in the advanced industrialized democracies of Europe and North America concerning the impact of women in public office. Third, the major barriers facing the entrance of women into the national parliament in Thailand will be examined to see whether the Thai case is consistent with research findings on women and politics in industrial democracies of the West.

Thailand constitutes an interesting and significant context for studying women's political representation. First, the country is undergoing fundamental changes in her political system as a result of constitutional reform in 1997. Thailand is an example of a relatively stable, transitional democratic country. Since the new constitution, or the "People's Constitution" as it is sometimes called, Thai democracy is moving from a system with traditional patriarchal characteristics of governance toward one

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with greater accountability and greater transparency. Second, Thailand's economic development since the 1960s has gradually transformed it from a poor agrarian society to a more industrial one. This has changed the preconditions for democracy and civic society. Thus, Thailand provides an interesting test of the consequences of economic development and industrialization for the status of women. Third, the strong patriarchal tradition of Thai society and women's subordination has carried over into the contemporary period. If significant improvement in the political participation of women can be seen in Thailand, it would mean that the barriers to women's political underrepresentation are surmountable in a strongly patriarchal society.

One of the important questions concerning the low proportion of women in the Thai national legislature is whether or not their numbers can make a difference with regard to the types of bills introduced and passed. Female politicians who constitute a small minority may not be able to express their distinct preferences and priorities until their numbers approach a "critical mass". Hence, some questions come to the fore. What can account for the relatively low proportion of women's representation in the parliament in Thailand? What are the major obstacles facing the entrance of women into the political arena? In the following section, Thailand's case will be analyzed in order to examine whether women parliamentarians are more committed than their male colleagues to the pursuit of women's issues in the context of the country's low level of women's political representation in the Parliament.

Data Collection

We know very little about the various factors inhibiting women's advancement in electoral office at the national level in Thailand and almost nothing regarding whether policy outputs differ due to women's participation in policymaking. In order to assess women's impact in the Thai parliament and evaluate the obstacles that hinder women's advancement of women in public office, I conducted a number of in-depth interviews in December 2002, based on an interview guide, with female members of both houses of the Parliament, including one former cabinet member. The interviews covered a wide range of issues and questions, each lasting approximately one to three hours, and were tape-recorded. I also interviewed several persons, including those who ran unsuccessfully for seats in the Senate in 2000 and the House of Representatives 2001, who are knowledgeable and closely involved in the question of women's political representation. They provided first-hand insight

into how women in politics at the national level actually function. All the interviews were conducted by the author.

Realizing that any analysis of the legislative priorities of women legislators in a single session is unlikely to give a complete picture of the extent of their involvement with legislation affecting women, additional data was gathered. Data on the legislative agendas of female and male members of the House of Representatives in the Thai parliament was collected for several legislative sessions beginning from the advent of the government led by Thaksin Shinawatra, the leader of the Thai Rak Thai party, in 2001 to September 2003, in order to examine their policy priorities. In my analysis, women were compared to men serving in the House at the same time. Given the small proportion of women in the House of Representatives and the small number of bills initiated by the MPs, all types of bills were included in the analysis. The data were obtained from the Thai parliament, which maintains records of all bills and their fates.

Background

In 1932, women acquired the rights to vote and stand for election in Thailand following the change from the absolute to constitutional monarchy. Although Thai women were among the first in Asia to gain the franchise, their situation in the political arena did not substantially change after women obtained the right to vote. Career opportunities in electoral politics were culturally closed to them. It was not until 1949 that the first woman was elected to parliament. In the 1952 elections, four women were elected. In 1955, a law requiring candidates in parliamentary elections to belong to political parties was enacted. In the election that followed in 1957, there was little space for women and only one woman was elected. During the five decades between 1949 and 2000, there was little growth in the representation of women, and women's participation in electoral politics continued to remain minimal, although women consistently exercised their right to vote. The number of female parliamentarians has not kept pace with the considerable advances women have made in other areas. Women are often not recruited to run for elective office and are therefore unable to accumulate the experience and expertise needed to make them a viable force in politics.

Thai women face numerous obstacles in their struggle for political representation. The under-representation of women in legislatures is a serious problem because it runs counter to the ideals of democracy. The reasons for women's absence from the arena of electoral politics are many. Is it because

women are prevented from seeking and winning election, or is it because they have simply chosen not to enter the political arena? Research in this area suggests several possibilities. Women's sex-role socialization has inhibited their participation in formal politics. Women and men are conditioned by society to play different roles. Men are more active in the public domain while women are more active in the private realm. The concept of socialization encompasses the development of the stereotypical belief that only certain patterns of behavior are suitable for women and that politics is not included in these behavior patterns. Women also encounter this problem with the dual role as mother/wife and politician, which can be difficult to combine. The lack of self-confidence among women has also reduced many women's desire to participate in politics. The corruption of politics and the role of money have additionally limited many women's participation in the formal political arena. There is a complex interaction of structural, institutional and cultural variables that have had the effect of establishing the political realm as a near-male monopoly.

During the last 15 years, Thailand has undergone an extraordinary transformation. It has changed from an authoritarian regime to a multiparty democracy in which politicians are chosen in regular elections. In the late 1990s, a range of new institutions was established. The new constitution has been heralded as one of the most important events in the democratization of Thailand's political systems, which witnessed the transformation of parliament and significant changes in the electoral system. The new constitution of 1997 has provided a significant enabling framework for gender rights. Article 30 states that women and men shall enjoy equal rights, this is a first step towards giving women more opportunities to participate in the male-dominated political arena. It was the women's movement that has continually emphasized the gender-based capsizing of political institutions. Nevertheless, Thai women's role in politics continues to be minimized to tokenism in their ascent to political power.

The slow incremental increase in the numbers of women serving in the Thai parliament raises important questions concerning the impact of women in public office. If more and more women enter public office, what are the consequences likely to be for the content of politics? Does women's representation in the Thai parliament lead to women-friendly policies? It appears that women do have some specific priorities, and evidence especially from the U.S. and Nordic countries has demonstrated that women representatives actively seek to promote their agendas (Bratton 2002; Swers 2002; Thomas & Wilcox 1998; Wängnerud 2000). When we look at the

national level of government in Thailand though, the question of women's representation becomes more problematic because women's representation in the parliament has remained at the range of level of tokenism for almost the entire period since women were granted the right to vote and hold office. In the late 1960s, for example, there were only six women in the House of Representatives, or a mere 2.8 percent of the total House membership. This gradually increased to about 4 percent during the 1980s and jumped to 6 percent after the 1992 elections. In the 2001 general elections, women occupied only 9.2 percent of the seats in the lower house of the Thai parliament, a figure that is considerably below the Asian average of 14 percent. The proportion of women in the lower house increased to 10.6 percent in the 2005 general election, the highest ever in Thailand. In addition, women occupy only 10 percent of the 200 seats in the Senate.

This dismal record at the national level is also apparent at lower levels. Women legislators are markedly absent from provincial and local assemblies. The local level is often seen as the level where women can move into the political arena with relative ease. Despite some factors that may positively affect women's representation in local government (i.e. less competition for positions available, possibility for women to participate in politics alongside employment and family responsibilities, and increased acceptance of women's involvement in local-level government), it remains difficult for women to break into electoral politics, even at the local level. Women's recruitment to local and provincial assemblies may be of interest because it provides a good training ground for women wishing to pursue political careers at higher levels of government, in addition to providing a future pool of women candidates for the Thai parliament. Frequently local governments can serve as stepping-stones for women aspiring to parliament. However, the current low proportion of women elected to provincial and local assemblies provides only bleak prospects for the representation of women in parliament and other higher political positions in the future.

Unlike many other countries, the representation of women in Thailand has been somewhat higher at the national level than at the local level until quite recently. One of the main reasons why fewer women are represented at local and regional levels than at the national level may be that most local political bodies comprise rural areas, which are predominantly influenced by traditional views of women's public and private roles. The political sphere is reserved for men, and in many rural areas there exists strong prejudice against active participation by women in politics. Moreover, at the local level, power has traditionally remained vested in the hands of local worthies, and women

have generally been marginalized in the affairs of villages and communities. Female political representation on the local level varies considerably depending on the degree of urbanization. In the Bangkok area, for instance, the proportion of female politicians on the local level is considerably larger than on the national level.

The literature on women and politics suggests two major perspectives on political representation, namely, the descriptive and the substantive (Pitkin 1967; Phillips 1995). From the perspective of descriptive representation, electing more women serves the symbolic purpose of gender equality, and renders legitimacy to the political system. It argues for increasing women's representation in legislative bodies so that it better reflects their proportion in society. The substantive perspective claims that increased representation of women in parliament would make a substantive difference because women and men have different experiences and different priorities in political issues. Thus, it is considered important to incorporate women's interests and perspectives that lead them to advocate issues that are either marginalized or excluded, especially in times when legislative bodies are dominated by men. Women officeholders are often assumed to act on behalf of women, working to introduce and pass legislation that improve their political, economic and social positions.

The numerical presence of women presumes that female legislators will bring to politics perspectives, values and issues that are poorly represented. The presumption of female legislators acting on the behalf of women, or representing women's interests, constitutes a crucial part of many arguments in favor of gender parity in public office, and the legislature in particular. The substantive representation of women's interests implies that female politicians have a gendered awareness that leads them to act in certain ways. Can we assume that female politicians have a shared experience and perspective that unites them because of their gender? There are differences among women politicians based on ideological, ethnic, religious, economic, social, or other differences. There will always be women legislators who deny gender as a factor in shaping their priorities in policy issues. There are important factors such as party policy and party discipline that influence their political behavior. There also exist male politicians who advance women's interests and form alliances with women politicians to promote those interests. In order to understand the question of whether women are in fact representing other women, it is important to keep in mind the possibility that women politicians represent differences among women.

Women's Legislative Activities and Policy Priorities

Despite the recent increases of women in the national legislature in Thailand, we still know very little about these women. Who are they, and what motivated them to seek public office? Very little research has systematically explored the careers and the policy contributions of these women. Compared with female legislators in the 1990s, women parliamentarians now have a far better educational background. The demographic and social characteristics of representatives have changed over time. The newly elected legislators of the House of Representatives in 2001 were younger and decidedly better educated than their predecessors. In terms of education, female and male parliamentarians do not differ much. Candidates have been required to have at least a bachelor's degree or its equivalent, but in comparison with those elected in the 1996 general elections, representatives with a master's degree increased by nearly 24 percent, and from 17 to 41 percent in the House of Representatives. The increase was particularly noteworthy among those elected in the party-list system: 43 percent of the deputies had a master's degree and 17 percent had a Ph.D. (Kokpol 2002: 304).

The majority of female legislators had been actively employed before becoming representatives. Indeed, they were predominantly women who were already involved in the public sphere in one way or another, either as professional or business women, local officeholders, or members of women's organizations. Some entered politics from a civic worker or volunteer background. Female parliamentarians are more likely than their male colleagues to come from advantaged backgrounds and from political families. Both male and female parliamentarians are drawn disproportionately from the best educated in Thai society. However, women enter into national politics later in life than their male colleagues because women often have to fulfill responsibilities as mothers and wives before entering politics.

My interviews with female politicians complemented by other data, show that women in parliament overwhelmingly tend to come from the middle and upper classes, and in many cases belong to prominent political families. Many of them became politically active by being exposed to politics through family life or by joining organizations. Although some of the women politicians are feminists and have made efforts to advance women's causes, most of them are virtually indistinguishable from their male colleagues in their background, performance, and policy agendas. Do women legislators in Thailand serve as role models for the women of their country? Since the women parliamentarians in Thailand are from the same socio-economic elite as their male colleagues, it can be difficult for them to serve as role models for

the masses of Thai women. Family ties in Thailand, as is the case elsewhere in Asia, are a key variable in the determination of political networks and success in public life. It is often a father or a parent, who serves as a role model among women wanting to enter national politics. As one female member of the House of Representatives explained her entry to politics:

> My father was my role model. He was formerly a local politician, acting as a member of the municipality, and a member of the provincial council, and later became Member of Parliament and Deputy Minister of three ministries, respectively. During his two periods of being a senator, I had an opportunity to work as his assistant. That experience made me feel that when I was ready, be it my qualification and age, I would enter politics. I thought that to serve people or the nation, appropriate qualification and age were necessary so I waited until I was 25 years old, according to the new constitution, and got my master's degree to enter politics (http://library.riu.ac.th/webdb/images/InterviewKantawan.htm).

Turning to an examination of the motivation of female legislators for becoming a political candidate, there is some diversity among the female politicians I interviewed. The women were questioned about their motivation for entry into the national legislature: all expressed a motivation for entering politics that could be characterized as civic-inspired (they wanted to help the constituency, society or country in general, a goal which was coupled with a sense of public service), and some also expressed an opportunity-based motivation (such as they were encouraged to seek office, recruited to run, wanted to enter politics, or had previous political experience). Most of them said that they received encouragement from their family circle to enter politics. Several female legislators I interviewed entered political life through civic and volunteer activities, usually motivated by a sense of civic duty and a desire to make their constituency a better place. Two conclusions may be drawn from the interviews. First, women senators put more emphasis on civic-inspired motivations than their female colleagues in the House of Representatives. Second, women legislators of both houses of parliament pointed out that women in politics make more responsible choices, guided by civic-oriented considerations, rather than career or other opportunity-oriented motives, than their male counterparts.

A study of twenty senatorial candidates carried out by the Women in Politics Institute (2000) found some diversity among the respondents. When women senators were asked about their motives for seeking office, all

respondents gave civic-oriented reasons. The most common motivational theme was to help solve the country's problems and create a better society. Interestingly enough, many female candidates did not emphasize the issues of women and other underprivileged groups in Thai society. Some of the respondents gave a more opportunity-based explanation, such as they were supported by various organizations, friends or their families. Moreover, all respondents were influenced in one way or another by the fact that the Thai political system was changed by the adoption of the new constitution.

The Impact of Women Politicians

Do women legislators in the Thai Parliament have some specific policy preferences and interests different from those of male legislators? This question of women's representation becomes more problematic as a result of the small number of women in the Parliament. It is expected that the priorities and interests of female and male politicians are relatively similar because, as long as women in a legislative body constitute a small minority, they tend to adapt to existing conditions and act more like their male colleagues than their female colleagues.

In the international literature on women and politics, there has been a great deal of discussion on questions concerning the relationship between the numerical presence of women in politics, sometimes referred to as descriptive representation, and the expression of women's interests, or substantive representation. Many researchers interested in determining the impact of women on the policy process argue that issues pertaining to women would be better represented if there were more women legislators. They believe that the more women legislators elected, the more likely it is that women-friendly policies would be enacted. Electing more women potentially translates into increased substantive representation of women as an interest. However, there is no guarantee that increased descriptive representation would lead to enhanced substantive representation. If women and men politicians in general have different attitudes and perspectives on many issues, then it becomes important to elect more women to look after issues of specific interest to women. Past studies in this area indicate that women do not hold distinctive policy preferences as do men, except on a few issues (Holmberg & Esaiasson 1988; Wängnerud 1999). Recent research, however, indicate that there exist differences in attitudes and behavior between the sexes. Studies of female politicians, especially from state legislatures in the United States, show that they have distinctive priorities and interests, especially when the numbers of

women legislators increase beyond token levels. Female politicians are more attentive to issues of special interest to women such as families, children, health, education, and social issues (Clark 1998:118-119).

One of the questions regarding the small proportion of women legislators in Thailand is whether or not female politicians make a difference in their impact on Thai politics. If the Thai parliament increased its amount of women legislators, could we expect then a shift to issues that reflect women's concerns? Would politics with a high proportion of women politicians lead to policies which are different from those enacted by a strongly male-dominated political system? Will the nature of Thai politics change with the increasing share of women in political bodies?

Much has been written about the impact women have on issue areas of traditional concern to women in established democracies in the West. Many recent studies done on women's legislative activities tend to suggest that female legislators approach their work from a distinctive perspective based on their experiences as women. Indeed, the existing literature is rich with respect to the policy priorities and preferences of female legislators, especially in the Nordic countries and the United States. A number of studies claim that women have different policy agendas and priorities compared to men. Moreover, these gender differences are determined by the very differences in their socialization and life experiences. Once elected, women politicians are expected to legislate differently to men. For example, female legislators are more concerned with issues related to traditional areas of interest to women, such as families, social welfare, education, women's rights, children, environment, and health care. Their male colleagues are more likely to be concerned with "men's issues" such as economy, finance, business and defence.

A survey of nearly 200 female parliamentarians in 65 countries by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) showed that women have different priorities and interests compared to those of men. Nearly 82 percent of the respondents believed that women hold conceptually different ideas about society and politics. A very high proportion of respondents to this survey agreed that women's involvement in politics makes a difference. 86 percent of respondents believed that women's participation in the political process changed the nature of politics by bringing about positive changes in form, political behavior and traditional attitudes, substance, processes and outcomes. Moreover, an overwhelming majority, nearly 90 percent, felt they had a

responsibility to represent the interests and views of women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2000).

The theory of critical mass, when applied to gender relations in politics, suggests that when women remain a distinct minority within a legislative assembly, they tend to conform to the prevailing norms, but once the numbers of women reach a certain size, there will be a change in the nature of political discourse and policy agenda as the minority begins to act distinctively and challenge the patterns of gender interactions (Dahlerup 1988; Bystydenski 1992). It has been argued that "critical mass" numbers of women are crucial in transforming policies and politics. Few women do not represent a broad base for change, nor can they represent women of diverse backgrounds. Dolan and Ford, for example, argue that "[t]here is a variety of evidence to support the 'critical mass' thesis – that women act more distinctively once their numbers reach a certain threshold" (1998:77). Many others claim that it is difficult to keep women's substantive concerns on the agenda in the absence of a strong presence of women within Parliament. In a study of the Arizona state legislature, Saint-Germain concluded that women do make a difference in state legislatures. She found that when women were present in small numbers in the legislature, the proportion of bills proposed by women and men with regard to areas of traditional interests to women was not noticeably different. However, once women captured more than 15% of the seats in the legislature, women changed their legislative behavior – they were more likely than men to propose such bills (Saint-Germain 1989). It has been said that, with the proportion of women below 15 percent of a legislative assembly, women members may be relegated to token status. As Taylor-Robinson and Heath argued, "The problem for token women is that they may not feel that they have enough support to rock the boat and bring up topics of interest to women, because such topics may be criticized or ignored by the male super-majority" (2003:81).

The existing literature seems to suggest that as more women become elected, there will be more evidence of gender-based differences in policy priorities in legislative bodies, since an increase of women would include other life experiences with alternative lenses through which to view issues, problems, and policies. Some scholars claim that a critical mass of women legislators will be needed in order to pursue a women's agenda in the legislative body (Vega & Firestone 1995; Thomas 1994). Norris and Lovenduski argue:

> When a group remains a distinct minority within a larger society, its member will seek to adapt to their surroundings, conforming to the predominant rules of the game…But once the group reaches a certain size, critical mass theory suggests that there will be a qualitative change in the nature of group interactions, as the minority starts to assert itself and thereby transform the institutional culture, norms and values. (Norris and Lovenduski 2001:2-3)

One of the most convincing evidence of the "critical mass" thesis comes from Sue Thomas's (1994) study of female and male politicians in 12 state legislatures in the United States. In states where the proportion of women in the legislature was below 15 percent, women were reluctant to take a high profile on women's issues. However, in states where the proportion of women was 20 percent or more, female legislators gave priority to legislation that addressed traditional women's interest areas as well as increased their legislative activity and success at obtaining enactment for their proposal in such areas.

It is important to note, as Sawyer points out: "to increase the number of women in parliament, or even to increase the number of feminists in parliament, is insufficient to ensure that 'women' are better represented" (Sawyer, 2002:17). Nevertheless, previous findings on the policy priorities of women in respect to men have proved to be rather inconsistent. Some studies have found little evidence of gender differences in priorities and agendas due to party discipline, which tends to inhibit the manifestation of any gender differences in legislative behavior.

A critical question was whether female legislators can make a difference in a predominantly male institution like the parliament in Thailand. The scarcity of women in the parliament has made it difficult to evaluate the policy impact of electing women. Indeed, with 21 women serving in the Senate, compared with only 46 in the House of Representatives, it seems unlikely that they would "act for" women. It is difficult to test the "critical mass" proposition – that women act more distinctively once their numbers reach a certain threshold, since the proportion of women in Thailand is far from attaining a sufficient critical mass to enable them pursue a different legislative agenda than men. For women politicians in both chambers of the national assembly, the idea of a critical mass ranging from 15 to 35 percent women is of little relevance. The percentage of women in these

bodies remains well below 15 percent. In any case, one can ask the question, do women politicians in the Thai Parliament legislate differently than men, even if they are in a token position? As mentioned previously, research on gender differences in policy priorities have focused on the U.S. and Nordic legislatures. These studies have shown that, in many cases, women do pursue a different legislative agenda to men. Research that goes beyond highly advanced industrial democracies is rare. Taylor-Robinson and Heath (2003) have extended the research on gender difference in policy priority beyond the U.S. and Nordic countries to Honduras. Their research does not support the generalization that women legislators tend to place a higher priority than men on legislation relating to issues of traditional interest to women such as children and family issues. They found no gender-based differences in policy priorities on these themes. Yet they found that the results of their study support the contention that, as with women legislators in advanced democracies in the West, women politicians in the Honduran Congress put a higher priority on women's rights than their male colleagues, even when they have only token representation:

> …even in an inauspicious setting, where women have only token representation in the legislature, and economic and social forces make the task of women in politics difficult, women still legislate differently than men. Particularly when it comes to women's rights issues, even token women representatives play an important role in bringing legislative attention to women's concerns. (Taylor-Robinson & Heath 2003:94)

In looking at women's legislative activities inside the Thai parliament, I focused on committee service activities. In Thailand, as in many other countries, committee positions play an important role in the legislative process. Given the importance of committees in determining what issues get placed on the legislative agenda, the appointment of more women to relevant committees may increase the openness of the parliament to take up women's issue legislation. Previous research in Western democracies found female legislators serving on committees dealing with traditional "women's issues", such as education and health and social welfare. Thomas (1994), for example, wrote that female state legislators in the United States were more likely than their male colleagues to hold seats on committees related to their traditional role as caregivers. Either by choice or discrimination based on sex-role

stereotypes, women rarely serve on committees dealing with finance, budget, or science and technology. The women legislators in my interviews were involved in various careers, including the health field, education, business, and social work. Their educational and occupational background proved important in determining what these women will select in regard to committee assignments once they are in office.

In looking at committee assignments in Thailand, I found that female legislators in both houses of the parliament focus much of their legislative activity on issues of traditional interest, but not to the exclusion of all other issue areas. Not surprisingly, nearly 65 percent of the members of the House Committee on Children, Youth, Women and the Aged consisted of women (as of 20 April, 2003), areas where women have traditionally borne disproportionate responsibility. Further, women constitute 24-29 percent of committees such as Tourism, Public Health, and Social welfare. Yet, as compared with the situation in the past, women were no longer exclusively confined to a narrow set of committee assignments since women have recently made their way to the more traditional "male" committees, to a certain extent. Almost 24 percent of the committee members on Science and Technology and nearly 18 percent of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the lower house are women. Despite their small numbers, women who did succeed in getting elected were no longer dominantly swayed along sex-stereotyped lines into 'women's committees'. With this said, women are much less likely than men to sit on business committees. In committees such as Communications and Telecommunications, Armed Forces, Economic Development, Monetary Affairs, Finance and Banking, either there was only one woman or none sitting on the committee. The picture is also quite similar in the Senate. The data on committee assignments appear to indicate that these women parliamentarians pay considerable attention to issues of traditional concern to women. It would be misleading, however, to conclude that Thai women parliamentarians as a group are exclusively concerned with issues having an impact on the needs and lives of women to the neglect of other issues.

What about women's leadership activities inside committees? The chair is the focal point of committee activities and an important source of legislative power through controlling the agenda and the flow of discussion. The gender pattern in committee assignments is much more pronounced in the profile of women committee chairs. Only three women in the lower house held committee chairs in 2003, all within the traditional "women's committees" of Children, Youth, Women and the Aged, Consumer Protection, and Social Welfare. Despite the increase in the number of women MPs in the 2001

House election, the proportion of committee chairpersons who are women is much less than the proportion of legislators who are women. As for the Senate, the proportion of chairpersons who are female is the same as the proportion of female legislators. Only two women held a chair position in the standing committees on Public Health and Labor and Social Welfare. Why have women's membership and their leadership been concentrated on certain types of committees? There are several plausible explanations. One is that women legislators may have been steered toward areas of interest to women because of stereotypical views about their expertise. Another plausible explanation is that women may have chosen "female-oriented" committees because of their interest in these issue areas. My interviews with female legislators suggest that it is out of their own choice rather than outright discrimination that this gender disparity in committee assignments occurred. In short, appointments to committees tended to be based on the expertise and interests of the legislator.

Summary Table of Women MPs as Members of Standing Committees of the House of Representatives (as of April 20, 2003)

1. Committee on Administrative Affairs	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
2. Committee on Agriculture and Co-operatives	
Number of Women:	2 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	11.76%
Positions:	Assistant Secretary
3. Committee on the Armed Forces	
Number of Women:	1 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	5.88%
Positions:	Member
4. Committee on Budget Administration Controlling	
Number of Women:	1 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	5.88%
Positions:	Spokeswoman

5. Committee on Children, Youth, Women and the Aged	
Number of Women:	11 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	64.71%
Positions:	**Chairwoman**, Vice-Chairwoman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Spokeswoman, Assistant Spokeswoman, Member
6. Committee on Commerce	
Number of Women:	2 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	11.76%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Member
7. Committee on Communications and Telecommunications	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
8. Committee on Consumer Protection	
Number of Women:	2 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	11.76%
Positions:	Chairwoman, Secretary
9. Committee on Corruption Prevention and Suppression	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
10. Committee on Economic Development	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
11. Committee on Education	
Number of Women:	3 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	17.65%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Assistant Secretary, Spokeswoman
12. Committee on Energy	
Number of Women:	1 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	5.88%
Positions:	Spokeswoman

13. Committee on the Follow-up of the Implementation of the Resolutions of the House of Representatives	
Number of Women:	3 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	17.65%
Positions:	Spokeswoman, Member
14. Committee on the Follow-up of the Narcotics Prevention and Suppression	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
15. Committee on Foreign Affairs	
Number of Women:	3 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	17.65%
Positions:	Spokeswoman, Assistant Spokeswoman, Member
16. Committee on the House of Representatives Affairs	
Number of Women:	4 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	23.53%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Member
17. Committee on Industry	
Number of Women:	1 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	5.88%
Positions:	Member
18. Committee on Justice and Human Rights	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
19. Committee on Labour	
Number of Women:	2 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	11.76%
Positions:	Spokeswoman, Member
20. Committee on Monetary Affairs, Finance, Banking and Financial Institutions	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-

21. Committee on Natural Resources and Environment	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
22. Committee on Police Affairs	
Number of Women:	1 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	5.88%
Positions:	Member
23. Committee on Political Development	
Number of Women:	1 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	5.88%
Positions:	Assistant Spokeswoman
24. Committee on Public Health	
Number of Women:	4 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	23.53%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Member
25. Committee on Religion, Art and Culture	
Number of Women:	3 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	17.65%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Adviser, Assistant Secretary
26. Committee on the Review of the Minutes of the Proceedings of the House of Representatives	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-
27. Committee on Science and Technology	
Number of Women:	4 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	23.53%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Adviser, Assistant Spokeswoman, Assistant Secretary
28. Committee on Social Welfare	
Number of Women:	4 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	23.53%
Positions:	**Chairwoman**, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Member

29. Committee on Sports	
Number of Women:	2 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	11.76%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Member
30. Committee on Tourism	
Number of Women:	5 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	29.41%
Positions:	Vice-Chairwoman, Spokeswoman, Member, Secretary, Assistant Secretary
31. Committee on Transport	
Number of Women:	0 (out of 17 members)
Percentage:	0%
Positions:	-

Source: Thai Parliament
(http://www.parliament.go.th/h-commit/hon-commit.htm)

To examine the role of these issue concerns in the legislative career of female legislators, we also have to look at their legislative behavior. In contrast to committee assignments, women legislators did not specifically target women's issues in their legislative focus. Although nearly all the female legislators of the Thai Parliament I interviewed expressed women's common interests and concerns, they differed in the extent to which these concerns were salient. Judging from these interviews, it seems that both men and women have supported bills promoting issues related to women's interests in many instances. Yet, female legislators have appeared to be more concerned with women's interests than their male colleagues, even though they felt did not feel any "obligation" to represent women's interests.

To explore further whether female politicians behave differently to male politicians, where women have only token representation in the legislature, I examined the legislative agendas of both female and male legislators in the House of Representative from the time Prime Minister Thaksin formed the government. The bills were grouped into six categories by subject area (children, education, environment, health care/public health, welfare-social security, and other). The data was obtained from the offices of the House of Representatives, which keep records of all bills proposed and the bill's fate. It is difficult to assess the impact of women's political presence in national legislative assemblies such as the House of Representatives in the Thai

parliament due to the small number of women MPs, as well as to the strength of party discipline.

Are women legislators more likely than their male colleagues to attach priority to legislation concerning women? Women MPs have had an impact on a number of content areas. The presence of women legislators has made a difference in the number of bills introduced and passed dealing specifically with children and welfare-social security, the areas where women have traditionally shared a disproportionate responsibility for the rearing of children and for the care of those who cannot care for themselves. Proportionally speaking, the single subject of children has received an unusually large amount of legislative attention. However, there is no significant gender-based difference in the numbers of bills relating to children proposed. It is possible that male legislators in Thailand have become more diverse and knowledgeable about the issue of children than their forefathers. Contrary to my expectations and patterns of the long-established democracies in Europe and the United States, where women legislators tend more often than men to prioritize issues such as the environment, public health and health care, women legislators in Thailand did not introduce and work on legislation specifically relating to these areas. In sum, with respect to the issues of children and welfare/social security, even token female legislators play an important role in introducing and pushing those issues through the legislative process. Perhaps the increased presence of women legislators will make a significant difference in the types of bills to be introduced.

Several explanations arise as to why women legislators did not introduce and prioritize of issues important to women through the legislative process. One possibility is that they may find themselves pressured to conform and fit in to an overwhelmingly male-dominated institution.

Bills initiated by both female and male legislators in the House of Representatives from the beginning of the Thaksin government to September 2003

	No. of Bills				
Category		Proposed by Women		Proposed by Men	
	Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Children	**9**	**4**	**44,44%**	**5**	**55,56%**
Effective	8	4	50,00%	4	50,00%
Under Discretion	1	-	0,00%	1	100,00%
Withdrawn, Rejected, Put on Hold	-				
Education	**35**	**5**	**14,29%**	**30**	**85,71%**
Effective	21	2	9,52%	19	90,48%
Under Discretion	14	3	21,43%	11	78,57%
Withdrawn, Rejected, Put on Hold	-				
Environment	**6**	**-**	**0,00%**	**6**	**100,00%**
Effective	6	-	0,00%	6	100,00%
Under Discretion	-				
Withdrawn, Rejected, Put on Hold	-				
Health Care – Public Health	**18**	**-**	**0,00%**	**18**	**100,00%**
Effective	12	-	0,00%	12	100,00%
Under Discretion	6	-	0,00%	6	100,00%
Withdrawn, Rejected, Put on Hold	-				
Welfare – Social Security	**26**	**9**	**34,62%**	**17**	**65,38%**
Effective	24	8	33,33%	16	66,67%
Under Discretion	2	1	50,00%	1	50,00%
Withdrawn, Rejected, Put on Hold	-				
Special Category*	**288**	**17**	**5,90%**	**271**	**94,10%**
Effective	131	4	3,05%	127	96,95%
Under Discretion	147	13	8,84%	91,16	62,01%
Withdrawn, Rejected, Put on Hold	10	-	0,00%	10	100,00%
Total	**382**	**35**	**9,16%**	**347**	**90,84%**

* The special category covers bills related to all other issues, such as local administration, state enterprises, political parties, investment, taxation, businesses, finance, transportation, and funds.

Why do we need more women in leadership positions? Generally speaking, female political leaders in Thailand appear to believe that women are a force for good governance. Pavena Hongsakul, former minister of the Prime Minister's Office, said: "Women tend to be more concerned with creating a just society. And 99 percent of women are clean (not involved in corruption)" (The Nation, March 8, 2000). Similarly, Sudarat Keyuraphan, the first

woman to hold a ministerial post in the Interior Ministry, claimed that if half the Cabinet was female, there would be far less corruption in Thailand: "And by tackling the issue of corruption we could make a major contribution to improving just about everything in our society" (ibid.). In addition to women's sanitizing and cleansing influence on politics, some female leaders have emphasized women's distinct approach to problem solving. Women legislators are more likely than their male colleagues to conceptualize issues and policy problems more broadly. For example, Dhipvadee Meksawan, director-general of the Office of the Civil Service Commission said: "Generally, men tend to particularise problems while women's way of thinking is more holistic. On average, women are less overbearing and are therefore more capable of paving the way to a democratic society as opposed to a pyramidal or hierarchical social structure" (The Nation, March 8, 2000).

Other female leaders in Thailand were convinced that women legislators have shown to be more sensitive to issues most directly affecting women, families, and children than their male colleagues. For example, Laddawan Wongsriwong, a former deputy secretary general to the prime minister, said: "They are more concerned about the quality of life, about children, education, AIDS and the environment" (The Nation, March 8, 2000). The former Deputy Education Minister Kanchana Silpa-acha was of the opinion that "men may give more importance to issues other than those directly related to the needs of women and children" (Ibid.). Supatra Masdit and Pavena Hongsakula acknowledged that female leaders have distinct interests, but emphasized that they shouldn't confine themselves to "women's issues (Far Eastern Economic Review, April 13, 2000). In addition, in my interviews, female parliamentarians expressed the belief that women bring a different perspective to the legislative process. However, only one of respondents felt a sense of responsibility to represent women. Some of them were concerned about being pigeonholed as exponents of women's issues. There was a feeling that if they devoted themselves to women's issues, they could experience this as an obstacle in their political careers, by becoming closely associated with "soft" issues with a low status.

Employing data on bill introduction, this study shows that female legislators in the Thai Parliament do advocate a "female agenda" in the areas of children and welfare/social security, but no significant gender differences were found in other issue areas considered to be of traditional interest to women. Even though record numbers of women were elected to the House of Representatives in 2001 and 2005, they were still a very small minority of members. Women MPs have also faced problems because many of them were

relative newcomers, lacking relevant expertise and experience. Although the new electoral system did help to facilitate the election of women to the House of Representatives, it also acted to reinforce party dominance. Consequently, women legislators in the House feel more accountable to their party than to any potential groupings outside the parliament, such as women. Women do not behave differently than men with regard to a number of "women's areas", as long as they constitute a small minority. The impact of party is stronger than the impact of gender. Although most of the women legislators I interviewed recognized shared concerns among women and had a gendered awareness that women and men's life experiences give them different perspectives, only a few felt that women should speak up for matters that affect women.

Increased women's presence in national assemblies may not necessarily lead to improved representation of women's interests and issues. "Changing the gender composition of elected assemblies," Ann Phillips argues, "is largely an enabling condition…but it cannot present itself as a guarantee" (1995: 83). In other words, increased descriptive representation does not automatically lead to enhanced substantive representation. The extent to which a relationship exists between the numerical presence of women and the representation of women's interests, however formulated, is an empirical question. Women legislators may additionally disregard women's interests and behave like their male counterparts. It has been said that the token status of women in public office keeps them within the mainstream of politics (Norris & Lovenduski, 1989:108). It seems that while some female legislators are sensitive to the needs of women and pay considerable attention to so-called women's issues, it does not easily translate into an improved representation of their interests. Some women parliamentarians I interviewed appeared not to be anxious in giving special attention to issues having an impact on the lives of women and on areas of traditional concern to women, such as children, welfare, and education. They said that their role was not different from that of their male colleagues. It became clear, both from my conversations with the respondents and my observations of political women in Thailand, that as far as members of the House of Representatives are concerned, women's political loyalties rest with their political parties and constituents rather than with women *per se*. Even among women of the same party, it seems that their solidarity and loyalty rest primarily with the party, their constituents, and political patrons – not with the other women in the party. At the same time, female legislators pointed out that if some gender solidarity could be developed, then so much the better.

There is strength in numbers. Some female politicians told me that their goal is to reach the "critical mass" stage that will allow them to advance their political position and gain influence in the policymaking process. Forging alliances with other female politicians across party lines can be one opportunity for women to promote their interests. But alliances are not necessarily exclusively gender based. In many cases, alliances have been forged with male colleagues in order to bring about positive outcomes. Even if the percentage of women were to exceed a certain threshold, for example 15 percent or more, it is not likely that this would have any significant impact on female solidarity within the House of Representatives, given the relatively high level of political partisanship, which exists in that body. More women parliamentarians do not necessary mean better representation of women's interests. Attempts to forge unity among women MPs in the past have been prevented by the claims of party loyalty.

Existing research tends to suggest that the presence or absence of an organized women's caucus can influence the extent to which women legislators actively discuss and work on legislation that affects women and have a positive influence on the passage of such bills (Thomas 1991). Moreover, the presence of a women's caucus provides female legislators with additional resources beyond their numbers (Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994). In an effort to provide a focal point for women legislators of all parties, the Women's Parliamentarian Club, consisting of women members of the lower house and senators, was established in 1992. In the Thai context, women legislators come together more as an informal group than through a formal legislative caucus. It was intended as a forum for women legislators in both houses of the national legislature to meet together and provide encouragement and support for efforts that they make on behalf of women. Although it is the only formal space for women legislators, the Club has not been very successful in forging unity. Unfortunately, a majority of women legislators are infrequently involved in the activities of the Club. It seems that women legislators in the parliament do not have a strong collective sense of group membership since women are not a homogenous group. Its core membership consist of only about twenty members and, in the absence of a feminist identity or orientation among Thai parliamentarians, it meets quite infrequently and informally.

Obstacles to Increased Female Representation

What obstacles do Thai women encounter when they try to get elected into political office? In a patriarchal society like Thailand with a strong emphasis on the dominant role of men, the obstacles to women's candidacy and representation are many and extremely difficult to surmount. Women who attempt to run for elective office experience considerable difficulty. There are many factors that combine to preclude women from elected office in Thailand, thus the lack of women in political bodies cannot be accounted for by one single factor. Such an explanation for the lack of women in Thai politics is multi-faceted and requires some space for discussion. Various factors that underlie women's representation, or lack thereof, in advanced industrialized democracies are well researched and understood, while our understanding of women's representation in developing countries is much poorer. Moreover, Matland (1998) found in his study on women's political representation in developed and developing countries that none of the significant variables promoting women's representation in established democracies, such as electoral systems, women's participation in the labor force, the cultural standing of women and the country's level of development, has a statistically significant and consistent effect in those of less developed countries. His research seems to indicate that a minimum level of socio-economic development is needed to create favourable conditions, such as the development of electoral systems and women's participation in the labor force, in order to have any positive effects on the representation of women. Otherwise, anything below the minimum threshold has very minimal impact on factors favoring the representation of women in developed democracies (Matland 1998).

Pippa Norris (1987) argues that women candidates must overcome three major barriers to get elected to public office. First, they must be willing to become candidates for office. Women's political representation would increase if more women were willing to become candidates. Women are underrepresented because most of the candidates for office are men; it is impossible to get a woman elected if no woman runs. Second, the party gatekeepers must choose those women who desire to run as candidates. The attitudes of political parties toward women in politics can be a source of great difficulty for women in their efforts to overcome barriers that hinder their representation. Third, the voters must select the female candidates. The sex of the candidates plays a factor in whether a woman is selected, since women candidates can face difficulties in winning approval from voters due to the prevalence of sex-role stereotyping. In other words, in most political systems

women need to overcome three concrete barriers in order to be elected to parliament. These three barriers are eligibility, selection and election. The process of legislative recruitment involves the availability of individuals who are first, simultaneously interested in political activities and have the resources to get involved in politics; second, willing to come forward and to run for elective office; and last, who are selected among the pool of aspirants by the gatekeepers casting the final decisions over who is to stand for election. This supply and demand model is not unique and has been applied to established democracies (Norris 1997).

Recruitment Process

In this section, various factors that influence the parliamentary representation of women in Thailand will be examined. Through the recruitment process of eligibility, selection, and election, I will attempt to delineate the different variables responsible for women's access to the Thai parliament in order to provide a better understanding of the obstacles women face in political participation.

Eligibility

What variables inhibit the mobilization of women as parliamentary candidates? The first step is to be eligible to stand for elections. Eligibility as such refers not only to the basic democratic rights such as the right to vote and right to stand for elections, but also enumerates the informal requirements for candidacy. Such legal requirements for the eligibility of candidates include nationality, age, residence, holding public office, and education. After the enfranchisement of women, the formal requirements have not appeared to present any particular barrier to women in running for public office in most political systems and, therefore, do not seem to work to the disadvantage of women, relative to men (Norris, 1996). But, how do the formal rules of eligibility affect women in Thailand? The legal eligibility requirements are the same for men and women, and thus fail to explain the paucity of women in the Thai parliament. The informal rules and norms of Thai society, however, may be seen to present severe obstacles, given the lamentable social and economic position of women in Thai society. Generally speaking, parliamentarians are part of the socio-economic elite and are recruited from occupations in which there are few women; they are additionally distinguished by their high levels of education. Similarly, women

who do aspire to stand for national elections often come from influential political families.

Social and Cultural Obstacles

It is commonly assumed that socio-economic variables, such as the ratio of women's literacy, the ratio of women's participation in the work force, and the ratio of university-educated women, have an effect on women's political representation in the public arena. A recent study, for example, concludes that women's representation tends to increase when women approach the same level as men in areas of literacy, labor force participation and university education (Matland, 1998).

In Thailand, when compared to other countries in Asia, the ratio of women's employment outside the home is high. In fact, Thailand has one of the highest participation rates of women in the labor force in Asia, accounting for nearly half of the working population. However, such activities apparently do not have the effect of stimulating women's participation in politics. Women are concentrated in workplaces that are traditionally considered female and within these work places the overwhelming majority of women hold low-ranking jobs. Women are rarely found in high-level positions in economic structures where men acquire the skills and behavior patterns necessary and advantageous in the formal political arena. Although economic and social developments have liberated Thai women in many ways, and their participation in the paid labor force has increasingly become more visible, politics remains, on the whole, a male activity. At all levels of government, women are fewer in number, and if anything, occupy marginal positions in the formal political arena. The paucity of women in the Thai legislature cannot be attributed to the level of women's participation in the labor market. What then can account for the extremely low proportion of women candidates?

Studies on the relationships between socioeconomic changes and cultural values have resulted in the development of two contending schools of thought. The modernization school has argued that industrialization brings about pervasive cultural change. For instance, Ronald Inglehart (1997) argues that systematic changes in societal culture and its value system take place as a result of the shift from pre-industrial to industrial society, and additionally from industrial to post-industrial society. The other opposing school emphasizes the enduring nature of traditional cultural values and attitudes despite rapid socioeconomic changes, and claims that traditional values tend

to persist in the industrial era and have an autonomous impact on society (Inglehart and Baker 2000).

Thailand has experienced rapid social, economic, and political changes in recent decades. How have these changes affected societal culture and its value system in Thailand? The case of Thailand does not support the central tenet of modernization theory that economic development is closely associated with major changes in traditional values and beliefs. According to this theory, industrialization leads eventually to changes in gender roles, attitudes toward authority, and political participation. Traditional values persist in today's Thai society, despite the rapid socioeconomic changes that have taken place in recent decades. The political culture in Thailand has a traditional negative attitude towards the participation of women in political life. It is still common to see politics and women constructed as each other's antithesis. Traditional political culture in Thailand has been essentially elitist and non-egalitarian, thus many traditional views on the role of women continue to prevail. The role of women has long been primarily confined to that of wife, mother and housekeeper. The demands of domestic and parental obligations and the social separation of the sexes have prevented women from participating in the public arena on the same equal basis as men. As result, women have thereby not been able to obtain the experiences that are required for a political career. In addition, tradition can be a powerful force and religion further plays a key role in the lives of the great majority of Thai people. The deep and broad cultural heritage of Thai society, and more particularly its religious elements, has left an imprint on cultural values, despite modernization. In short, traditional values continue to exert an independent influence on the process of modernization in Thailand.

According to cultural explanations, women in traditional societies tend to be reluctant to become candidates for elective office. They may not come forward because they anticipate being discriminated against. Moreover, if they run for office, they are disadvantaged relative to male candidates. Women's chances for election to parliament are generally not as good as men's, and studies in the past have for the most part failed to present systematic evidence confirming the relationship between cultural variables and women's representation in elected office, since it is difficult to test empirically the influence of culture on women's representation. However, there is now strong and persuasive evidence that cultural factors constitute a key factor in explaining women's entry into elected office (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2003) have put forward the argument that prevailing political culture affects women's political recruitment. Voters

in a traditional political culture are more likely than those in an egalitarian culture to perceive women as less qualified than men to run for public office. In fact, systematic cross national evidence has shown that egalitarian attitudes toward women as political leaders are strongly related to the proportion of women elected to public office (Norris and Inglehart, 2001: 133-34). One of the most important cultural factors in explaining women's under-representation in politics is sex-role socialization. According to theories of sex-role socialization, women and men are socialized to accept gendered assignments to different kinds of roles in life. For instance, women's domestic roles are viewed as incompatible with the toughness and assertiveness that politics and political leadership require; thus politics is perceived as a male domain. As a consequence, such stereotypical attitudes influence whether women are prepared to run for office. What is discovered in many societies with traditional cultural values is that women may be reluctant to come forward as candidates for elected office. In a survey of nearly 200 female parliamentarians in 65 countries by the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU), many respondents (76 percent) cited hostile attitudes toward women's political participation as an important obstacle to running for parliament (Inter-parliamentary Union 2000).

The exclusion of women from public life in Western cultures also reflects the warp and woof of Thai culture. The influence of a hierarchical and authoritarian culture in which women's roles are defined by Thai Buddhism, which is circumscribed by more or less non-egalitarian attitudes towards women's political role, has subsequently led to the low participation of women in political life. Throughout the history of Thai culture, two primary beliefs about men and women have prevailed. First, women have been viewed as the inferior sex and second, that men and women are fundamentally different psychologically and sexually. Furthermore, both male dominance and the male/female dichotomy are conceived in religious terms and Buddhism, for instance, has repeatedly legitimized women's subordination by providing a rationale for containing women in the private world (Darunee 1997: 169).

Women in Thailand today, as in many other Asian countries, still live in a shadow of a long tradition of female subordination, with a rigid division between the public and private emanating from Brahmanism. Women are prohibited from being ordained as monks and as a result, they are frequently considered to be 'merit deficient' – unable to obtain merit as monks (Doneys 2002: 168). While women can become nuns, the status of nuns is held as inferior to that of monks. However, a woman can at times obtain merit

through a son who has been ordained; hence upon entering monkhood, sons can pass on the merit to their mothers. In the spirit of Thai Buddhism, women are viewed as 'polluters', and there is fear that women will "contaminate and lessen the sacredness of Buddha images, and especially holy amulets worn by men" (Juree 1994: 523). Any physical contact between women and monks is forbidden. There is a widespread fear that, upon entering the public sphere, women may drain strength from men. In short, the pattern of male supremacy and women's subordination in Thai society is underpinned by Buddhism. This religious influence can additionally be found in the legal codes of the country through, for instance, the many laws relating to labor and family, which have been discovered to be discriminatory. Consequently, the potent influence of Thai Buddhism tends to reinforce traditional social roles assigned to women, reinforcing cultural values that continue to marginalize women's political interests.

Educational Obstacles

One of the important reasons for the paucity of women in the Thai parliament has been their under-representation in the eligibility pool of the population from which candidates for the national assembly are drawn. It has often been said that women's educational, occupational, and socio-economic status is important in determining the eligibility of women for elective office. Women often lack the "appropriate background" to be chosen as a candidate. Despite the fact that the educational level of women in Thailand has risen substantially in recent decades, the formal requirements for candidacy in the Senate and the House of Representatives, requiring the minimum of a bachelor's degree, seems to work to the disadvantage of women, relative to men.[1] This recent requirement has reduced the number of prospective politicians, which correlates with claims made by many potential women candidates who cite a lack of higher education as a significant factor (The Nation, March 8, 2000). Many women leaders at the local level who do not have a university degree became disqualified from running for elected office at the national level. The high educational profile of parliamentarians has thus only served to reinforce elitism in national politics. Orathai Kokpol observed that the requirement of a bachelor's degree for candidacy discriminates against women:

[1] Former members of the House of Representatives and the Senate are exempted from this educational requirement.

> [I]t has a negative impact on social groups with a low level of education such, as farmers, industrial workers and informal sector workers, because it excludes the majority of them from the right to stand as a candidate in an election. This has reduced the already low representation of these groups even further. In contrast, this requirement favours civil servants as the most educated group in Thai society… The fact that under 10 percent of Thai people with passive voting rights hold bachelors' degrees brings into question whether this requirement for candidacy obstructs democratic representation. (Kokpol, 2002: 296-7)

Occupational Obstacles

Women are also handicapped when the question of occupation is considered. Women are scarcely found in the professional, administrative, and managerial occupations that often lead to political careers. Women's occupational backgrounds are often not as "suitable" for elective office as those of men; hence recruitment of potential politicians to the parliament in Thailand emphasizes a certain strata of the population. In the 2001 general election, three types of occupational backgrounds were prominent among candidates and elected members of the House of Representatives. They were primarily politicians, businessmen, and civil servants. As a result of the high educational requirements, bureaucratic positions have now become a significant channel into parliament. The proportion of candidates with bureaucratic backgrounds dramatically increased from 6 percent in the 1996 election to 24 percent in the 2001 election for the House of Representatives. It is also interesting to see the decrease in the number and proportion of candidates with political backgrounds dropping from nearly 18 percent in 1996 to 12 percent in 2001. It is not clear whether this change can be attributed to the requirements of a bachelor's degree (Kokpol 2002: 296). Businessmen have always been an important component of the pool of candidates, but the percentage of candidates with business backgrounds has decreased to 24 percent in the 2001 election, lower than previous elections. The occupational backgrounds of the candidates for the 2005 general election appeared similar to candidates in the previous election; when examining the backgrounds of senatorial candidates, it was found that civil servants (38%), lawyers (17%), and candidates with business backgrounds (16%) were amongst the most prominent. Since women are found to be in few numbers in such "suitable" occupations, this has only further reduced their opportunities of securing a political career.

The Selection Process

The second stage consists of the selection process whereby potential candidates can be identified and selected for elections. One of the most significant factors that may increase the proportion of women's representation is the willingness of women to put themselves forward as candidates. The decision to run for elected office can be influenced by a number of factors that operate at the individual level. On the supply side, these include such factors as the resources and motivation of potential candidates. These resources include financial backing, human resources needed to run the campaign, education, availability of time, organizational affiliation, and established networks. Generally speaking, fewer women possess these necessary resources.

In interviews female parliamentarians mentioned poor self-esteem, lack of experience, and lack of resources as some of the major reasons why women do not want to run for office in Thailand. Women often do not have the experience necessary for a political role, as well as lack the confidence deemed appropriate for running for public office. Women's perception of their own self-worth is shaped and reinforced by prevailing male-biased social norms and beliefs. It may be the case that women additionally may lack information and knowledge about the procedures and mechanisms involved in politics. One Thai study argues, however, that Thai women's interest in politics is not less than that of men and that they are even more knowledgeable about politics than men (Thomson 1995).

Another reason women have been slow to enter the arena of electoral politics is related to their view of politics. Female values are viewed by many women as incompatible with the money schemes and corruption associated with Thai politics. For a woman aspiring to stand for election, her perception of politics is important. In Thailand, as in many other developing countries, it is often assumed that the political game is too dirty for women to play because of their supposed moral superiority, an excuse often used by females not to enter politics. Politics is viewed as representing an arena for dishonesty in which politicians do not shy away from bribery and corruption and frequently pursue their own selfish interests. According to people's attitudes and the self-conceptions of women legislators in the Thai parliament, women as symbols of innocence and virtue contrast with corrupt Thai politics. Almost all female parliamentarians I interviewed emphasized that women's distaste for abuse of power and money in cultivating influence has made it difficult for many women to be part of political life. But at the same time, it is pointed out that the participation of women in politics is important because of their sanitizing influence on politics. They were optimistic about the future as well

as convinced that voters perceive women candidates as a new alternative in the tarnished political scene dominated by men. Voters believe that men and women alike would increasingly vote for women candidates as they tire of the corruption that has riddled Thai politics for years. This linkage between the self-conception of women as symbols of innocence and moral superiority and the voters was also evident in an interview with Sudarat Keyuraphan, a woman MP of the Thai Rak Thai party, conducted by the Far Eastern Economic Review. As she explained, "I deeply believe that most voters would like to elect women politicians at both national and local levels. They have strong confidence that women politicians have better intentions and are less corrupt than male politicians" (April 13, 2000).

Thai elections feature frequent vote-buying, vote-rigging and cheating. The high level of vote-buying and malpractice in Thailand is a deterrent to women coming forward as candidates. The political reforms in the second half of the 1990s were meant to put an end to the corruption and vote-buying which had marred elections in Thailand for decades. The 1997 Constitution included several provisions designed to fight corruption. One such provision incorporated compulsory voting in an attempt to make the electorate so large that vote buying would become extremely expensive. Another provision worked towards greater transparency of political contributions. Moreover, it included the creation of a mixed electoral system in which 100 members of the House of Representatives are elected under a party-list system while 400 members are to be elected in single-member constituencies. Nonetheless, as the elections of 2000, 2001 and 2005 show, vote-buying and other election irregularities persists as a reminder of the continuing deficits of Thai democracy. While it is difficult to assess the level of vote-buying, the practice seems to exist in all parts of the country, although it is most common in rural regions. Since candidates cannot distinguish themselves by a set of distinctive party policy stances, they continue to rely on their own vote-mobilization apparatus with vote canvassers. This means that candidates have to foster personal networks for a support base through district services and by building up a large campaign war chest.

It was estimated that despite the new regulations to eliminate vote-buying and corruption, a total of 20 billion baht in bribe money was circulated during the election campaign, with the price of votes ranging anywhere from 50 to 1,000 baht in the 2001 elections to the House of Representatives (Ockey 2003: 671; Bangkok Post, January 30, 2001; Newsweek, January 15, 2001). The Senate election in March 2000 was seen by many Thais as the first test of political reform under the 1997 Constitution, which attempted to

broaden citizens' participation in politics while limiting the influence of traditional money politics and corruption. There were hopes that Thailand's first Senate election would bring about a change in the country's corruption-riddled, fragile democracy. However, there were numerous reports of electoral corruption and malpractice, such as vote buying and voting irregularities, including accusations that political parties were financing candidates behind the scenes.

As for other individual-related factors, financial resources have come to play a determining role. The electoral contests in Thailand, notwithstanding the official ceilings imposed by the National Election Commission, are very costly; this gives an undue and unnecessary advantage to candidates with large sources of funds available to them, over those whose resources are more limited. Women, due to lack of financial resources, often find these measures prohibitive and unhelpful. There is very little reliable data available thus far that assesses the use of campaign funds under the new system, but it is still more than likely that a successful candidate needs huge amounts of money. In 1995, for example, a politician in a typical constituency in the northeastern region spent 20-25 million baht (Surin and McCargo 1997:139; Bünte 2001:194). In the 2001 House of Representatives election, it was estimated that the total amount spent by a politician was within the range of 30-50 million baht, and in some cases up to 70 million baht. Where do these funds come from? Candidates draw upon their own and family resources and from whatever wealthy, personal connections they may have in the constituencies. In the case of candidates for the House of Representatives, some economic support for approved candidates comes directly from their parties. The fact that candidates need much financial resources to get elected has rendered political office at the national level, especially in the House of Representatives, beyond the reach of many politically ambitious women. Electoral and financial rules for the Senatorial elections forbade candidates to belong to a political party and further regulated how the money should be raised and spent. In many cases, candidates for the Senate had to raise the bulk of the money themselves. Although candidates for the Senate are not permitted to conduct election campaigns, money still proved to be an important asset for election (Women in Politics Institute 2000).

Personal support organizations, based on networks of vote canvassers for politicians, are a key factor for the high cost of electoral politics in Thailand. In order to buy votes, candidates rely on a network of vote canvassers, who usually consist of influential individuals in the villages. Despite the campaigns against vote-buying, its practice is an important factor in making election

campaigns very expensive, and thus prone to corruption and bribery. A would-be politician's first tasks are to form a supporters' organization, and then do everything possible to obtain the support of voters. In order to cultivate a supporters' organization that will ensure election and re-election, candidates use enormous amounts of money in presenting gifts of money to their constituents. The larger the supporters' organization, the greater the amount of money required. When it comes to elections, it is not so much the stand on specific issues candidates take, but the strength of the candidate's support base that assures electoral victory.

Women are often at a disadvantage in the patron-client system of Thai electoral politics because they often do not have access to the patronage network machinery for election campaigns. Men have stronger links with established political party machines and patronage networks. Even if women succeeded in establishing support structures, men have larger networks from which to draw support than women. In many cases, women have been unable to win because of their relative isolation from the world of patronage politics. If women are to win in elections, they would have to rely on the male-dominated network. In fact, successful women candidates are often linked to the patronage system through kinship political networks established by the woman's political family and the family of her husband.

Political Parties and Women Candidates

The selection of potential candidates also involves the process through which individuals are selected by the party. In many countries, party leaders, party officials, and faction leaders play the role of gatekeeper in the nomination process. In some countries, non-party selectors, such as local notables, financial sponsors, and interest groups play a crucial role in selecting candidates. Norris (1996) distinguishes between the bureaucratic and patronage systems of candidate selection. In a bureaucratic system, the selection process is highly institutionalised and based on legalistic authority in the Weberian sense; and it is determined largely by party rules that are detailed, explicit, standardized and followed by party officials. In contrast, in a patronage-oriented system, the selection process can be relatively closed and characterized by patronage led by power brokers at various levels. Such a system is built upon either traditional or charismatic authority.

One important aspect of the relationship between parties and women is whether the parties encourage women as electoral candidates. It is commonly believed that parties do not provide women with opportunities to run for

elected office. In the past, it was quite common for women candidates to face discrimination by party elites in long-established democracies. Party leaders did not recruit women to run for office while they directed those women who desired to run for election toward seats in which they were sacrificial lambs, thus failing to support women's candidacies. As a consequence, women have difficulty in fund-raising and in being perceived as credible candidates by the media and by voters. More recent studies in advanced industrial democracies, on the other hand, have shown that such bias against women candidates has diminished significantly (Carroll 1994; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994).

In the case of Thailand, one of the most important causes of the failure to mobilize more women candidates to the House of Representatives is attributable to the inability or unwillingness of party leaders and other selectors to recruit a substantial number of women candidates.[2] Thai political parties are still very much male-dominated institutions and the party gatekeepers who choose the candidates are similarly predominantly men. Although an increasing number of women have become members of political parties, they are largely excluded from governing bodies in political parties and occupy less than 10 percent of high positions in political parties. In Thailand, where the selection process takes place in the context of a patronage-oriented system, non-party gatekeepers such as financial supporters, provincial and local notables as well as various interest groups also play a role as selectors. Political parties in Thailand as a whole have done little to encourage women's electoral candidacy. Indeed, it is widely known that political parties in Thailand are responsible for failing to nurture the emergence of women as candidates and leaders, whatever their public stance. The traditional cultural conceptions of women's social roles are deeply embedded in political parties. Several female MPs I interviewed blamed the male political culture in the parties for the parties' failure to nominate women. Women candidates received less support than men from party leaders, faction leaders and local leaders. Moreover, they mentioned that women were less likely than men to be asked to stand for election. The few women who have managed to attain parliamentary seats have usually had family ties to a male party or faction leader.

Thai political parties are less likely to nominate women candidates for the winnable seats in the House of Representatives. An analysis of the 2005 general election results clearly show that women were nominated for hopeless contests more often than men. With the exception of the Thai Rak Thai

[2] Parties are not gatekeepers to the Senate because candidates for Senate seats are not permitted to have party affiliation.

Party, the success rates for women candidates were low. The Democratic Party put up 52 women candidates, but only six were elected. Among the 35 women candidates from the Mahachon Party, only one was elected. The Chart Thai Party nominated 40 women candidates, but only two were elected. As for the Thai Rak Thai Party, the success rate of its women candidates was extremely high. 44 out of the party's 51 women candidates were elected, reflecting the unusual, but favorable political atmosphere for the governing party.

One of the most important characteristics that distinguish women's recruitment in Thailand is the very different party environment in which it takes place. In contrast to some of the new democracies in Asia, Thai political parties tend to have weak structures, without clear-cut ideologies and policies. Moreover, many parties do not survive very long and, generally speaking, voters appear to be less interested in the programs of political parties than in obtaining the benefits brought to the constituencies by politicians. This is especially so in rural areas where the failure of parties to formulate concrete policies to benefit the rural poor led other factions and individual politicians to "seize the initiative in promising benefits to rural voters, and claiming personal credit for improvements delivered" (Ockey 2003: 670).

In the historical development of Thai politics, political parties played a peripheral role in electoral politics for a long period because there was a lack of firm legal basis. From the moment that Thailand entered the modern era, political parties have evolved as de facto institutions and neither their organizational forms, their position in the political system, nor their basic functions have ever been explicitly defined in legal terms. Indeed, the legal status of political parties in the system of government in Thailand has been vague and indefinable. This is in part due to "the absence of continuous political development and the frequency of military coups"; it was not until the adoption of the political party law of 1981 that political parties became more important in electoral politics at the national level (Bünte 2001:199).

Today, as in many other countries, political parties play an important role in the Thai national-level political system. Party membership is mandatory for candidates running for the House of Representatives, and parties (and other selectors) decide which individuals will have the opportunity to become their candidates at the national level. Nevertheless, the weak institutionalised nature of political parties in Thailand favor those who have accumulated political capital, i.e. resources based upon political connections, party experience and external group support. At the lower levels of government—provinces, districts, *tambons* (Tambon Administrative Organizations, TAO), and

villages—political parties do not play any significant role in politics. Instead, informal political groupings of local politicians dominate the political arena (Nelson 2002: 316).

On the surface, it appears that most Thais do not feel alienated from the political parties, and their affiliation appears to be very high compared with that of other Asian countries. Judging from statistics on party membership, many Thais belong to a political party. In December 2001, the 15-plus parties had altogether more than 20 million members. The five largest parties had garnered more than 18 million and the Thai Rak Thai Party accounted for 6.8 million of them, followed by the Democrat Party with 3.7 million. The other large parties are Chat Pattana with 3.6 million, New Aspiration with 3.1 million, and Chat Thai with 1.6 million (The Nation, December 29, 2001). Fewer women than men participate in political parties; however it should be noted here that it is difficult to obtain reliable statistics on party membership.

Despite the seemingly impressive membership figures, many political parties are weakly institutionalised and lack firm organization. From the very beginning, Thailand's parties were formed around personalities, not around particular issues. Even today many of them essentially are still loose coalitions of factions and individuals organized around influential political leaders or bosses. As one analyst of Thai politics argues, "parties have always had to rely on factions, and individual MPs, to establish their own electoral networks" (Ockey 2003: 670). Parties are largely based on patron-client relations as they form, merge, split, and disappear with the political fortunes of these patrons. The weak party system has encouraged national level candidates to rely on the support of local elites for election campaigning. At various local levels, parties are largely absent, thus allowing traditional networks of politicians and local bosses to dominate Thai electoral politics. Networks are highly important in terms of the vote-getting structures that are necessary for candidates to make the leap into the parliament. Structures that successfully acquire votes include a group of vote canvassers. Such necessary structures are generally based on networks of influential leaders who need vote canvassers to get elected and "they seek contact either with individuals who have contact to local individuals or with local notable themselves, whom they might incorporate in their cliques to enhance the chances of being elected in the next election" (Bünte 2001). Local political cliques (known also as *phuak* or *phakphuak*), or networks of local bosses, play a powerful role in mobilizing support. Local bosses usually consist of notable local politicians, such as village headmen, tambon headmen, members of the Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAO), and as well as local and provincial councillors (Nelson 2002: 316).

These informal groups are all-powerful within their domain and serve as henchmen for the MPs.

Election

The last hurdle in the process of becoming a parliamentarian is being chosen by the voters.

Voters and Women Candidates

An obstacle for women seeking to get elected is that voters discriminate against female candidates due to gender stereotyping. Voters are more influenced by preconceived notions about males and females than each individual's personal merits. While female candidates are still perceived in terms of their private and domestic roles, male candidates are viewed in terms of their public and occupational roles. Voters tend to perceive women as less qualified and less suited for politics than men. There exists empirical evidence that voters' stereotypical view of gender has negative consequences for female candidates and that women candidates would be more successful if they were perceived as possessing masculine traits such as assertiveness and toughness (Hoddy and Terkildsen 1993; Thomas and Wilcox 1998). Evidence of voter discrimination has not been conclusive and an increasing number of studies in advanced industrialized democracies have questioned the findings that voters react negatively to female candidates. These studies have found that the gender of the candidate has no or only little impact on voting, and that women do as well as men in garnering votes (Bernstein 1986; Chaney and Sinclair 1994).

In my interviews with female legislators in Thailand, some indicated that voters' gender stereotypes had some negative impact on women candidates when running for parliament, while others said the gender of the candidate did not have any significant impact on voting and that voters are just as likely to vote for women. My analysis of the results from the general elections in 2001 and 2005 found that women candidates were less successful than men candidates. This particular lack of support for women candidates reflects the predominant perception of women's role in Thai society, where men exercise the official power and women are confined to exercising power behind the scenes.

I was told by several female parliamentarians that, in election campaigns, female candidates had experienced difficulty in being taken seriously, and had often been subjected to humiliating comments and derogatory

remarks. They had to convince voters that they were competent and possessed masculine traits. Unfortunately, comprehensive and systematic surveys of voters' perceptions and attitudes do not exist in Thailand. Nevertheless, available studies seem to indicate that some stereotypes related to women still persist, and that female candidates have faced difficulty in winning voter approval.

The Effects of Electoral Systems

According to the existing literature on women and politics, the characteristics of an electoral system in a country is one of the most important factors affecting women's representation in national assemblies, especially in long established democracies. The effects of the electoral system cannot be explored in isolation from the broader institutional and socio-economic context of a society. The literature tends to support the contention that women have higher levels of representation in legislatures in countries with party-list systems than in countries with single-member majoritarian electoral systems.

Under the proportional representation (PR) system, women are often included to broaden the party ticket in order to appeal to as many different segments of voters as possible. Rule's study (1987, 1994) found that the PR system was the major determinant of women's political representation, even when socio-economic, political, and contextual factors were controlled. Nations employing mixed systems, combining both PR and majoritarian electoral systems, were shown to elect more women by proportional vote than by district vote. Studies have also found that there is a direct relationship between women's representation and district magnitude (i.e. the number of representatives per district), hence the larger the district, the higher the women's turnover. It should be noted here that the relationship between type of electoral system and women's representation is not automatic. Some studies question the argument that PR systems are better suited than majoritarian systems in increasing women's representation in national parliaments. Chapman, for example, argues that "before the sudden improvement of recent times, proportional representation systems had already existed for decades in Norway and Denmark with the same infinitesimal proportion of women legislators as everywhere else" (1993: 6-7). It has also been argued that some majoritarian systems have elected more women than some PR systems.

Can the paucity of women politicians in Thailand be attributed to the way in which politicians are elected? Can theories about the relationship of electoral systems and women's electability, developed in the advanced

industrialized democracies in Europe and North America, explain women's under-representation in Thai politics? Thailand has recently undergone a transformation of its electoral system since the country experienced widespread dissatisfaction with the existing political system in the 1990s. This resulted in a new constitution and a new electoral system. What happened to female representation when Thailand changed from a plurality system, in small multi-member constituencies with multiple voting, to a mixed system of single-member constituencies and proportional representation? In mixed systems, such as in elections to the Japanese House of Representatives and the German Bundestag, far more women have been elected through proportional representation than through single member districts. Will the relationship between the type of electoral system and female representation hold true for elections to the Thai House of Representatives in Thailand?

Before the introduction of a new constitution in 1997, direct elections were held only for members of the House of Representatives, based upon the relative majority system. During the period of 1978-1997, Thailand had a unique type of majoritarian electoral system. While most majoritarian systems have single-member constituencies where each voter has only one vote, Thai voters were permitted to cast ballots for as many candidates as there were seats in a constituency. In other words, a plurality system in small multi-member constituencies with multiple voting was used for elections to the House of Representatives in Thailand. In the pre-1997 electoral system, party labels were weak and candidates tended to rely on their own vote-getting mechanisms, rather than on parties, in election campaigns. This was because, in two and three seat constituencies, it promoted contest, not only between competing parties but also between rival candidates from the same party. As a consequence, well-organized personal vote-getting networks of individual politicians served as the most important mechanism for mobilizing votes. The previous electoral system for the Lower House, based on multi-member constituencies and a multiple vote plurality system, did not facilitate women's representation.

The 1997 constitution provides for a mixed electoral system whereby 400 members of the House of Representatives are to be elected on a single-member constituency basis and the remaining 100 elected on a party-list basis forming a single nationwide constituency. It was expected that those elected in the national constituency would need far more than solely local appeal and thus need to represent larger interests, as against short-sighted local interests. Cabinet ministers are further chosen from the party-list MPs, forming a mixed system that is partly based on the German electoral system. The electoral

threshold on the proportional side of the election is 5 percent nationally. This new mixed system was first applied in the general election of 2001, producing results which, in terms of the representation of women, were higher than the election which preceded it.

It was presumed that certain features of the new electoral system had the potential to facilitate more women into public office. The first feature was the creation of new seats in the House of Representatives in Thailand which increased from 392 to 500. This new change was perceived as allowing for the election of more female candidates; however, this increase was not at all matched by substantial increases in the number of women candidates. The oft-described reason for the paucity of women legislators at the national level is the low level of turnover among the legislators. A high level of turnover can facilitate women's entry into parliament. In the 2001 Lower House election, for instance, there were more newcomers than ever before. Since it was the first general election under the new electoral system, there were suddenly more new open seats available than before. Half of the 400 constituency MPs and 36 of 100 MPs from the party-list system were newcomers (McCargo 2002: 249).

Another feature of the new electoral system allotted 20 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives to a party-list system. It was anticipated that this particular feature would facilitate the election of more women. However, the Thai political parties have yet to nominate a sizeable number of women in winnable positions. Although only a few female candidates were placed within the top ranks of party lists, there were some differences in the recruitment of women candidates between political parties. The Thai Rak Thai Party, the Democrat Party, and the Chat Thai Party were very poor in nominating women candidates. Each of them had only one woman candidate in the top twenty slots while a number of parties, such as the New Aspiration Party and the Chat Pattana Party, were marginally better and had two candidates. Altogether, the two largest parties, the Thai Rak Thai Party and the Democrat Party, fielded a total of four and nine candidates on their party lists (Kokpol 2002: 294). The differences between the political parties cannot be explained on the basis of ideological differences. As Orathai Kokpol (2002: 94) commented, "no party paid serious attention to the promotion of the role of women in politics in recruiting candidates."

The change of electoral systems from multi-member districts to a mixed system, in turn, affected women's legislative recruitment. The new electoral rules resulted in much smaller single-member constituencies, making it possible for candidates to focus their election campaigning on a more limited

area of influence than in previous elections. Consequently, these smaller constituencies favored those candidates who had close contact with their home districts, thus enhancing the significance of local politicians in influencing elections, and especially members of provincial assemblies and their vote-getting networks. For political parties, these provincial politicians were interesting as potential candidates for the House of Representatives (Nelson 2002: 289). As Nelson explains, "Having succeeded in their attempt to be elected to the provincial council means…that these people command solid networks of local leaders…who provided them with the villagers' votes they needed to win their seats" (Nelson 2002: 289). The traditional system of patrons and clients has continued to influence voting. The new electoral system continues to push candidates to campaign on the basis of personal qualities and constituency services. Candidates have to raise their own money and form their own support organizations based on networks of vote canvassers.

A low number of women candidates participated in the January 2001 election for the House of Representatives. 352 (12.65 %) of the 2,782 candidates competing for the 400 seats in the constituency election were women, while in the party-list election 148 (15.74 %) of the 940 candidates vying for the 100 seats were women (Kokpol 2000). The number of women candidates was lower than in the previous general election of 1996. A mere 11 percent of women candidates in the single-member constituencies were elected, while 4.7 percent in the proportional representational side of the electoral system for the House of Representatives were successful. In the 2005 general election, as in previous elections, far more women were elected through single-member majoritarian systems rather than via party lists. About 11 percent of women candidates were successful in single-member constituencies and only 6 percent in the party-list election. In other words, women were more successful in single-member districts, a format that commonly restricts women's success at the polls, than in party-list districts. This is contrary to the existing literature on women's representation, in that women are more likely to get elected in PR systems than single-member majoritarian systems.

In examining women's representation on the parties' lists of candidates, I found that women were over-represented in those list positions that do not have a realistic chance of getting elected. Some studies pointed out that there are three types of candidate positions: sure, marginal, and hopeless seats (Haavio-Mannila et al., 1985; Darcy, Welch and Clark, 1994). The sure seats are those which a party is sure to keep, even if they experience a poor electoral

showing. The hopeless seats are those a party is certain to lose even if it has a good election. Marginal seats are those between the above two types of seats, namely, seats a party will win in a good election but lose if it experiences a poor election. For the party-list election for the House of the Representatives in Thailand, women were represented disproportionately in marginal, and more especially, in hopeless seats. The Thai case is consistent with past research findings. If women's political representation in descriptive terms is to be improved, it is necessary to increase women's nominations to winnable seats. In fact, a number of female MPs pointed out in interviews that it is important to get women into positions high enough on the party list to be elected.

Unlike its predecessor, the new Senate was to be entirely elected. The electoral reform under the new constitution provides for direct elections for the 200 senatorial seats from 76 provinces. The new Senate has become more powerful than the previous one. In the past, Thai senators were political appointees and acted as rubber stamps for the government. But, what expectations did the framers of the Senate hold with regard to its function? First, the Senate was considered essential to a system of checks and balances. It was expected to act as a check on the House of Representatives and the government. It has the power to recommend the removal of persons holding political posts including the prime minister, cabinet members and MPs. The constitution calls for an elected Senate to act as a watchdog over the country's political arena.

Second, it was expected that the Senate, like the party-list members of the House of the Representatives, would represent larger national interests as opposed to the partisan and parochial local interests represented by the members of the House of Representatives. Thus, senators are required to be non-partisan. Since the Senate, unlike its predecessor, was to be elected, the framers had to create an electoral system capable of yielding the desired result. Instead of the 400 single member districts that elected representatives, there were only 76 districts for the Senate, one for each province (changwat). The larger constituencies designed for the Senate were one means. It was assumed that the Senate would provide for alternative elements, unlike those elected through the electoral system of the House of the Representatives. Hence, it was hoped that persons elected from the larger constituencies would be different in character from partisan politicians. A further expectation was that the Senate would, most probably, provide stability and continuity. The Senate with its independent and longer term of office (six years) would give stability to the political process of the Thai political system.

The 2000 election to the Senate was unusual in many respects, with voter turnout particularly high in the Thai context. 70 percent of all eligible voters voted in the election. The constitutional requirement of compulsory voting, with penalties for those who fail to exercise the right to vote, and the provision for advance voting, appeared to be reasons that drove people to the polls. Senatorial candidates are not permitted to engage in "normal" election campaigning. They were only allowed to introduce themselves to the voters. The 2000 Senate elections under the new electoral rules took a long time to implement, requiring five rounds to complete, due to voting irregularities and fraud. The fact that the senatorial election excluded the role of parties further raised expectations regarding the number of women willing to run, since it was perceived that non-partisan politicking would protect women from being subjected to discrimination by party elites. Even though candidates for the Senate were not allowed to have backing from political parties, it was estimated that a majority of the senatorial candidates, that is 70 percent, had close connections with political parties (Croissant and Dosch 2002). This was also confirmed by a number of senators I interviewed. Among the candidates for the Senate seats, a dominant group was made up of figures from the military and bureaucracy (39.5 percent) (Ibid.).

Research, particularly in the United States, has shown that the paucity of women female legislators at the national level depends on the power of incumbency and that open seats are advantageous to women. Women's chances for winning elections are not so great because most female candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives have to run against incumbents, not for new or open seats. Since the 2000 election for the Senate was the first opportunity in Thai history for candidates to be directly elected by the people, all seats were open seats. However, despite the expected surge of women to participate in the election in addition to the reformist atmosphere in which the constitution was drafted, the electoral results were disappointing. Women's representation in the Senate did not improve under the new Constitution. The new Senate contained a slightly larger proportion of women representatives than the outgoing Senate whose members, by contrast, were appointees. What was surprising was the very low number of women who did decide to run. There were no women candidates at all in 28 of the 76 provinces and among the total number of 1,523 candidates for the senate, only 115 candidates were women (7.6 percent), and only 20 women were elected out of a total of 200 elected (10 percent). In the Bangkok area, a mere 26 women of the 265 candidates ran for Senate, only one was elected.

One important means by which women entered parliament in Thailand was what is called "the kinship route." Women who successfully run for parliament are often members of families with a well-established political base. Indeed, the role of kinship in the electoral success of women candidates is significant in Thailand. As mentioned previously, it is difficult for women to create a personal support organisation without patronage from influential leaders in the party. Very few women wishing to enter into national politics have an independent support base, and many women legislators owe their seat to being the wife, daughter, sister, niece or granddaughter of a former politician or government official. It was estimated that approximately two-thirds of the new female senators were wives and relatives of politicians or former government officials (Sombat 2002: 208). Among the successful candidates for Senate seats are the wives of former interior minister Sanan Kachornprasart and justice minister Suthas Ngernmuen (Bangkok Post, March 5, 2000)

The Thai case defies most accepted explanations prevailing in the literature concerning related factors facilitating increases in the representation of women in parliament. According to common belief, the Thai party-list system should have brought about the election of more women to the House of Representatives. Thailand's experience serves as a caution against common expectations that the adoption of proportional representation will lead to greater legislative opportunities for women. The number of women elected to the Thai Parliament remains minimal.

On the whole, it is difficult to discern any significant influence that the new electoral system has had on women's electability. It will most likely require a number of elections before the new electoral system will bear any fruit. When a new electoral system is introduced, there is quite often a transitional period before the electorate and parties come to terms with its logic. Hence it is not realistic to expect that it will deliver immediate results. The Thai people have barely had a chance to familiarize themselves with the new electoral system, let alone acquire any experience with its operations. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the electoral system changes will have an immediate effect. Matland (2002), for example, has urged caution in attributing too much significance to the effects of the PR system on women's political representation in the developing world. He argues that PR systems do not help to increase the numbers of women legislators in developing countries (Matland 2002: 10), while Norris also claims that the role of the electoral system is "independent of levels of political and socio-economic development" (Norris 2000: 349).

Although the existing literature on women's representation tends to find electoral systems as being positively influential, the impact of the electoral system concerning the representation of women in Thailand has not resulted in any significant changes in both the single-member constituencies and the PR multi-member constituencies. In fact, it is fair to say that the electoral system has played only a minor role in shaping the political opportunities for women in Thailand. What is of more significance are the cultural, socio-economic, and political factors that have a daily impact on women's lives. Hence, as far as women's representation in the national assembly is concerned, the main problem in Thailand lies not with the electoral system per se, but with the dearth of women candidates and the absence of women selected to run in winnable seats.

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Khunying Kalaya Sophonpanich, MP	13 December 2002
Prateep Ungsongtham, Senator	14 December 2002
Huwaidiyah Pitsuwan Useng, MP	17 December 2002
Nipa Pringsulaka, MP	17 December 2002
Maleerat Kaewka, Senator	18 December 2002
Yowvapa Wongsawat, MP	18 December 2002
Malinee Sukavejworakit, Senator	19 December 2002
Kornvipa Boonsue, Senatorial election candidate	19 December 2002