

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION

The role of women in Thailand's economic development is widely recognized and has been particularly important since industrialization began almost four decades ago. Women represent 44 percent of the labor force and 85 percent of workers in leading export industries. At 67 percent, their participation rate is the second highest in the Asian and Pacific region.

The advancement of Thai women has been closely associated with economic progress. Throughout the period when the Thai economy was growing continuously, women's economic and social status improved substantially, especially in the areas of health and education. Although women's employment has increased in quantity along with globalization and labor market flexibility, its quality in areas such as relative pay, conditions of work, safety, and job security has in many cases been deteriorating.

Just when the gains and the will for women's improvement seem to have gathered momentum with major issues and their solutions identified, the economy has been hit by crisis. It would be a great shame for these gains to be snatched away or frozen by the current recession. The next few years are particularly crucial in ensuring that women are given opportunities to exercise their potential to the fullest. Any programs and projects implemented as part of the economic restructuring, and any expenditure cuts, should be sensitive to the differences in impact between men and women as a result of existing gender disparities.

Rapidly changing economic conditions will introduce new issues and new challenges that must be dealt with. Economic restructuring may have many negative impacts, such as higher prices and unemployment, but it can also bring about new choices and women can make a significant contribution to economic recovery.

The focus of Bank operations in Thailand has shifted from traditional growth and development of physical infrastructure to social and human development objectives. The Bank's evolving operational strategy is to assist Thailand in sustaining economic growth and long-term competitiveness in the face of an increasingly complex global environment, while achieving more equitable development with an emphasis on quality of life, decentralization and regional dispersal of economic activity.

Within this framework, it is possible to include several projects that would directly and indirectly influence women's economic and social position. Some modifications and additional details in project specifications are required for women to increase their participation and ensure their equitable share of the benefits. Entirely new projects may be introduced to ensure that women, either individually or as a group, will become major beneficiaries. The Bank can assist both in defending the gains that women have made so far and in correcting the remaining imbalance. In addition, future programs will have a more lasting and extensive impact if they do not regard women only as workers receiving short-term monetary gains, but also include elements aimed at encouraging women to take part in decision-making and empower themselves politically. This would enable them to influence future policy direction and sustain the momentum in women's development.

Furthermore, since many of the Bank's traditional operations now begin to overlap with those of other donors, NGOs, and the private sector, new programs should be introduced and new partners considered. A clear emerging trend is the cooperation between government bodies, NGOs, and academics, as well as the acceptance of international standards on women's rights.

Women must be given the opportunity for equal participation in economic development. To that end, the national institutions should also be strengthened to conduct monitoring and advocacy activities effectively. Their personnel must fully understand the implications of macroeconomic policies on women and identify timely and appropriate responses based on reliable and innovative indicators on gender and development.

Finally, in the context of Thai society, the work procedures used in these programs should be carefully designed so as to avoid social and cultural conflicts, including confrontation with men. This is particularly important in rural areas where traditional attitudes still exert a strong influence on women's social and economic role. Men should be involved in projects as much as possible when appropriate. And most importantly, they must be convinced of the benefits that women's economic empowerment will ultimately bring to their community and to society.