

Localizing Feminism: Women's Voices and Social Activism in Thai Context

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Feminism, with its two faces – an academic theory and a social movement, traveled to so many parts of the world. It has been transformed when interacting with specific context of different societies. Feminism has contribute tremendously to both the theoretical works and social activism in Thailand while it has been interpreted and interacted with local specificities. To understand how feminism has been localized in Thai society, we may start from observing the activities of groups focusing on 'gender' issues in the civil society, the complex concerns and needs of different groups of women, and the challenges for feminism in this particular context.

Feminism and Women's Movement: Different Problems, Internal Debates, and Flexible Alliances

There have been so many different 'women's issues' and concerns expressing in different forms and in different arena.

As the polity transformed into illiberal democracy, the Thai political arena has been accommodating so many groups struggling on women's issues. The Foundation for Women and the Friends of Women Foundation, to name a few, have been working on improving women's lives in the workplace and also on the issues concerning women's well-beings, such as sexual violence and human trafficking. The Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW) has been calling for legal changes to guarantee the equal political rights and state protection for women. There have been networks of women's groups and organizations, such as the Women Network Reshaping Thailand, to push for women's participation both in the polity, the economy, and the reform process. There are also organizations working on sexuality issues, such as the Women's Health Advocacy Foundation. The EMPOWER, and SWING (Service Workers in Group Foundation) have focused on sex workers. These organizations may have different images and understanding of women's situations and problems. They may agree on certain issues and disagree on some others. They may or may not share certain goals and dreams in terms of women's roles and places in Thai society. Such differences reflect diverse pictures of women in Thai society as well as distinctive frameworks and explanations among people working on women's issues.

While so many groups of women have been suffering from many forms of oppression, ranging from lack of opportunity to develop to full potentials to sexual violence and double standard, many other groups believed that the principle of gender equality has been materialized in Thailand. The mainstream media have depicted Thai women as urban, middle-class professionals facing the problem of 'glass-ceiling' when trying to advance in the organizational structures or from their own guilt due to the inability to fulfill the roles of wives and mothers. At the same time, the problems of rural and urban lower-class women cannot be ignored. For decades, women have been parts of the supply of cheap, unskilled or semi-skilled labors for the industrial and service sectors. The issues of job security and hazardous working condition have been among the issues raised continuously by the labor movement. Women have been among the first groups to lose their jobs when economic crises hit. Issues raised by some groups calling for legal changes, such as the amendment of law to allow married women to keep their maiden names, were perceived as irrelevant by women with different social background.

As more and more women and their allies started to make their own specific claims both on the Thai state and civil society, the gender issues became increasingly complicated with different approaches and arena to present the demands and struggle for changes. Many younger generations of women may find the right-based activism and the demand for more women in formal politics irrelevant for their lives. The young

middle-class women may prefer to express their concerns and issues through cultural practices, such as art, performances and literature, to traditional means of lobbying and pressuring states for policy changes. There have been new alternative spaces to maneuver. For example, many networks based on gender or sexual identities created their own communities to exchange information and discuss ideas. Groups working on specific issues, such as unwanted pregnancy and abortion, may choose to disengage from the public policy process of the state and dedicate their time and energy on forming a network of support groups and medical practitioners to provide women with information on all the options available and the services they may need. Instead of debating and pushing for legal and policy changes, such network enlarge and empower women to choose the alternatives they prefer although some of the alternatives were not allowed by the state and discouraged by many in the civil society.

Internet has provides women activists with new channels to communicate among themselves and to reach new and larger audience. Many feminist groups chose to exchange ideas and organize their activities through online community. Social media has also served as an arena to create and nurture groups of women to express their common problems and concern. Some other groups used the internet as a channel to raise awareness or to inform the wider audience on various issues regarding gender and sexuality. Such channels enlarge the number of people receiving the information while allowing many to voice their disagreement with feminist moves and positions. Collective actions and public contestation of gender issues have taken many forms in a variety of locations.

When gender intersects with sexuality, the division among women become even more magnified. Women with different sexual preferences, values and lifestyles have been uncomfortable with the image of women as wives/housewives/mothers that seems to exclude so many who do not fit in. Also, women may disagree on the sexual norms that prescribe sex in monogamous marriage for procreation as the only acceptable or 'normal' sex. Women with different sexual preferences, location, and lifestyles have disagreed on the issues ranging from ideal body/beauty and sex outside marriage to compulsory sexuality and forced motherhood. All women, as many have put it, are not necessarily heterosexual, wives or mothers. Women do not have to conform to the middle-class sexual norms in order to qualify themselves to make claims and express their ideas as women. Many aspects of sexuality have been among the issues of fiery debates among women and activists. The beliefs in proper sexual practices intertwined with the understanding of patriarchal oppression and the approaches for liberation of women from such oppression have contributed to distinctive perception and values of various forms of gender and sexual activities. For instance, while some Thai feminists do not tolerate commercial sex, others looked at it as a type of work women might choose due to their particular reasons and circumstances.

In terms of academic activities, feminism as an academic discipline has been institutionalized. There are two women's studies programs at the graduate level in two universities in Thailand. Similarly to the situations in many other societies, the programs have not been marketable and have to struggle more or less to recruit new applicants. Some observers suggested that feminism as a field of studies is not able to attract people's attention as it used to decades ago. This may reflect the mood and fad in the academic world, as well as the changes in identity politics in the country. Feminist thinkers in the academe have been asking the question regarding the state of the discipline: what should be the direction of feminism in Thailand and how should it position itself among the fluctuating and fragmented streams in the society. The fact that the same question have been repeatedly considered and debated during the first decade of the 21st century may suggest that feminism in Thailand is having an identity crisis. Although the discipline has found a place in the universities and tried to converse more or less with the Thai public, the fact that there seems to be no unity in terms of theoretical work and social activism may make some groups of women feel uncomfortable with feminism becoming ambiguous and uncertain.

The Impacts of Feminism in Thai context: Explanatory Power and Application

There have been major discrepancies between the image and roles of women depicted by feminism and the situations of various groups of women in Thai society. Feminism did lead to many political and social changes for women and gender relations that have to be understood and dealt with.

Despite the continuous works of the theorists and thinkers, many people still cannot understand what feminism is all about. To some, feminism is right-based theory and social movement while many believe that feminism is not quite different from male chauvinism. To depict the complicated picture of feminism and the Women's Movement in Thailand, we should start off with the different understanding of the term Feminism itself. Many might agree that feminism as a theoretical approach and social activism aims to alter gender inequality and oppression. Some want to include women into the mainstream of the society. They have been calling and working for the presence of women in the positions of power and decision-making. Many others struggle to liberate women from the complicated network of unequal power structures. These different understandings have contributed to different focuses and disagreement. Such distinction also contributed to different perspectives regarding the places and effects feminism has had on Thai society.

A short history of the Thai Women's Movement has been linked closely with the Students' Movement of the 1970s. However, a number of women, most of them with law degrees, had been working to alter the legal status of the Thai women. The emphasis on liberal principle of gender equality has been dominating the thinking and leading so many moves regarding women's issues in Thai society. When discussing 'women's issues,' many Thai would reiterate the same point about the increase of women's presence in the public arenas. More and more women should be included in the work force and in the decision-making positions in various forms of organizations. The Thai state should provide women with formal political equality and opportunity to be included into the existing institutions. This liberal approach has been more or less successful in calling for legal and formal changes. The equal right between men and women has been guaranteed in all the constitutions of Thailand since 1974. Many important laws, such as laws on domestic violence and the quotas for women in some electoral bodies at the local level, have been passed. The women's presence in the public arena has been evident. Despite the success, this approach to feminism has been criticized that it overlooked so many roles and problems of women in Thai society. Moreover, it has been threatened by the apparent division among women due to different claims and needs.

The belief that Thai women were kept in the domestic sphere of the households and barred from playing prominent roles in the polity and the economy led to a criticism that such belief was not based on an accurate picture of Thai women and reflected the middle-class biases. However, the places and roles of women of different classes might be quite different from the understandings based on the belief in public – private divide and separate spheres for men and women. The image of women as passive 'housewives' seems to occupy the beliefs of so many Thai despite the fact that Siamese women commoners have been the main productive units in the agricultural sector and small trade. Those women have been working in the economy while taking care of the households since the male commoners had to serve as labors in the feudal system. Women of the lower class have also been playing important roles as cheap labors in the modern Thai economy. Many of them have been major earners of their extended families supporting their children and husbands. The image of women as housewives financially supported by breadwinner-husbands is quite recent import that seems unfit for many groups of women who have been major earners supporting their families.

The attempt of the modern Thai state in the 1940s to inculcate the society with the imported middle-class sexuality, emphasizing the containment of sex in monogamous marriage and the notion of middle-class nuclear family, might succeed in turning many middle-class women groups into housewives. These groups of women might fit the image of women struggling to be included in the public sphere and share more or less similar problems with their sisters in some Western societies. Different roles, expectations, and experiences of Thai women with different social location have been complicating the 'women's issues.' The main problems of each group of women have been diverse. Some groups of women called for better pay and safe work environment. Many have been concerned with the 'glass ceiling' blocking advancement of women in organizations and state politics. Equal political and legal rights might be meaningful for some women while other issues, such as day-care services and sexual violence, might be more important for many others.

It has been suggested that the understanding of women's actual roles is essential in assessing the status and place of women in Thai society. Such understanding seems to suggest that many aspects of

women's activities and influences have been overlooked. Many women have been playing influential roles in politics from local to national levels. Their roles range from pushing and directing the course of actions from behind the scene at the personal level to organizing and working in details to get things done. These distinctive modes of participations of women can be elaborated by looking at women in the opposing color-coded political movements that have been dominating the Thai political scene for many years. In both the People's Alliance for Democracy (Yellow-Shirts movement) and the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (Red-Shirts Movement), there were women doing all the detail works feeding and taking care of participants in numerous and lengthy rounds of demonstrations against the political power holders. Some observers would argue that these activities were quite similar to their household roles, but without these nameless women these political gatherings could have been unsmooth and inconvenient for their fellow protestors. To focus on women, or men, who spoke and led the political gatherings reflects how small activities that made up of collective actions have been devalued and overlooked. Since many Thai women played the roles of nuts and bolts of their communities' activities or political protests at various levels, to focus on the roles of prominent leaders left the attempts and sacrifices of women invisible and undervalued.

Many women of the Thai elite have been influential and successful in manipulating the directions of public policies and state politics. The roles behind the scene have been not quite evident since they have been maneuvering behind the scene. Recently, many powerful women have been associated with either the Yellow-Shirts or Red-Shirts Movements as financial supporters or the real movers. Although so many groups of women activists have been calling for the increase in women's presence at all level of the political and economic structures, especially in the positions of decision-making, it might be misleading to focus on the formal positions while neglecting various forms of actions of women as they participated in politics and the economy. This leads to another question whether the improvement of women's statuses in Thai society means to recruit more women into certain institutions and expect them to perform similar roles. Or should women be allowed and supported to perform all the roles that they have done and chosen to perform. Should women participate in the public sphere in those ways they are capable of instead of forcing them to be the same? Should we support women in various roles to contribute and participate in the ways each of them wants to do. The success of feminism should mean understanding and accommodating all the roles of women while allowing debates on its appropriateness rather than prescribing the model for all.

Different channels and means available and chosen by women depend on the location, ability, and preferences of each one of them. Observers and activists might prefer certain approach of participation while deplore others. Some might find the manipulative activities behind the scene of many women unacceptable, but to condemn without looking at the specificity and limitations of channels and means to influence the direction of life situation available for different groups of women might cripple rather than supporting them. However, to understand and project the complex roles of women in a political society, we need to look carefully at various roles of women and their impacts at all levels. These distinctive and specific roles of women in Thai society might broaden feminist understanding about the roles and places of women in the complex unequal power structures.

Besides the different channels and means of influences, women have been facing dissimilar sets of problems. As mentioned above, class does matter for women. Well-educated women with well-paid jobs may be concerned with issues and problems that other less-advantaged groups might perceive as unimportant or irrelevant for their lives. The intersection between gender and other social dimensions, such as class and subculture, make it more difficult to identify the coherent agenda that all Thai women could agree on. Different social statuses and locations led to distinctive types of problems for women. The issue here is how to accommodate all these differences into the same agenda or to allow women spaces to exchange their specific problems and pressing their demands on the Thai state and civil society while not being pressured into speaking in one voice.

When gender intersects with other social dimension and specific locations of women, what we have seen are various ways to experience and live the feminine lives and identities. To understand the diversity of experiences, problems, and needs of Thai women, there should be a range of forums for women to voice, exchange, express, and discuss their specific needs and claims rather than allowing a certain group of women to represent the rest. The forums and arenas for women do not have to be formal at the state level, but opening up the spaces for women will benefit women in forming formal and informal groups and networks for

both collective and personal issues. To secure all the spaces for such activities to support women's well-beings in the widest definition is essential. Many of the issues women want to share and exchange ideas might be considered as inappropriate for people with certain moral and political beliefs. For example, the debate whether commercial sex is a form of patriarchal oppression or a type of work a person may choose under her/his particular circumstances and limitations may bother some groups, but it should be among the issues feminist thinkers and activists exchanging distinctive positions and ideas.

The fact that women as an identity group and the women's movement have been divided by so many social, economic and political dimensions may dishearten lots of feminist thinkers and activists since such divisions could be interpreted as the sign of weakness and failure to unite women to move together as one. However, the differences and contestation among women can be perceived as a sign of success of feminism itself. Feminism as a theory and a social movement has allowed and encouraged women to voice their own views, experiences, and problems. As more women started to speak for themselves, we can see how different women have been. Some problems and concerns raised by groups of women are products of the changes that older generation of Thai feminists dedicated their lives to fight for, such as the inclusion of more women into the capitalist labor force. When women went to work in the sphere separating from households, new types of problems such as the need for daycare and more roles demanding more time and energy from women emerged. The ability of feminism and the women's movement to face the challenges of diversity and disunity and to provide arenas for women to discuss and disagree with one another while working together on some agreeable issues reflects the growth and maturity of feminism.

Challenges for Feminism in Thai Context

Changes in other areas of social lives, political conflict, and embracing the differences among women are among the major challenges for Thai feminism.

Many factors in the Thai context have been the limits or challenges that feminism has to deal with. The continuing moves and contribution of the theory and the women's movement contributed to certain changes in the lives of many groups of women which in return posed the new questions or issues for feminism to work on. Three important issues should be considered as: the tendency to neglect the interrelations between gender and other dimensions of social life, the impact of political conflict in Thailand on feminism, and the attempts to go beyond arguing that women are different to thinking of how to live and work in the context of those differences.

Many feminists in Thailand have been focusing on gender dimension of social life. Although gender has been related to other structures and factors, there has been a tendency of many to focus on changing gender roles and relations rather than considering the interplay between gender and other power structure. Focusing on gender power relation might not be enough since women have been still trapped in a network of power relations that obstruct them from freedom to choose their courses and actions in lives. Women's roles and statuses have been perceived and assessed while holding other structures affecting women's social lives constant. The beliefs in gender equality which value activities in the labor force, politics and the arenas outside the households demand time and energy from many women who still have to be responsible for their families and the households. The mainstream media and education have been inculcating the idea that women can excel in all the activities and arenas both inside and outside the domestic sphere. Thai middle-class women who want to conform to such image and ideal have to bear the complex burden since other structures did not adjust to their increasing roles in the labor force. The depiction of women as wives and mothers taking care of their homes and families while so many rules regarding love, relationship and child rearing still demand that women must be submissive and nurturing, make it more and more difficult for women to cope with conflicting roles and expectations. The state and civil society require women to take care of their own children despite the fact that large numbers of women have been working outside the homes as major earners for the families. There has been no provision to support women's child-rearing roles, such as day-care and other services to alleviate the complex roles of women as mothers and workers. The rules of relationship that demand women to be nurturing and submissive contradict the requirement for

women to be more assertive in the work place and the economic and legal independence many groups of women have enjoyed. At this point, it might be useful to call for the adjustment or changes in terms of norms, expectation and practices both in the public and private arenas. Feminism cannot be detached from other aspects of social lives of women – especially many dimensions of sexuality, such as child rearing and intimate relationships.

Feminism and the women's movement have been affected by the prolonged political conflict in Thai society. The conflict reflects the fundamental questions of the Thai society – how should the political community be structured and organized. It suggested that the current order is crumbling while people cannot disagree on how the new one should look like. Such conflict divided up people along the line of different political worldviews. It has tremendous impact on both the state and the civil society. The conflict is overwhelming the Thai society and overshadows other issues that social groups and movements have been struggling for. The disagreement affected feminism and the women's movement and turned into many rounds of heated debates. It became more difficult for many women to work together. The conflict that has been shaking Thai society at its core may weaken feminism by highlighting the differences and push aside many issues and specific needs that various groups of women have been trying to publicized and raising public awareness. In this context, it is certainly more difficult for women's groups to struggle for their specific issues since many concerns of women have been considered as 'soft' and less significant when compared with the matters relating to political system and structure. Being superseded by more urgent issues of the day affects the direction and the approaches for political moves. It is interesting to see how the political conflict will be handled, what will be the marks it leaves for the society and the political terrain, and whether feminism will be able to contribute in various ways to the resolution of conflict and the political reform process.

The divergence in terms of political worldviews is a manifestation of differences among women that need to be understood and accommodated. Women should not force into the same mold to be similar to one another. It has been raised repeatedly that women are distinctive, but it is the time to consider how to live with the diversity. It is difficult and painful for some when realizing that women do not necessarily be 'sisters' sharing similar experiences and needs. To allow one another to be themselves is an important step for supporters of feminism. Besides lowering demand on one another to behave in a certain way, the formal and informal forums at all levels and arenas of social life should be provided and developed for women to express themselves and their problems when they want to do so. As a contribution in political reform process, feminist thinkers and activists may call not only for more women's presence in the political structure, but to secure the space and channels for women of different needs and backgrounds to speak and make claims in their own voices. The condition for growth of feminism on Thai ground depends on the ability and willingness of the supporters to embrace and tolerate the diversity among women.

Feminism does take Thai women and the whole society somewhere although women did not find themselves at the same point. The fact that women may not stand together on all issues should not discourage feminists, but it is extremely essential to tolerate the differences and one another. It is important for women to learn to be one another friends and foes in the movement, as well as in the same political community.