

TO: NDI Staff
FROM: Marissa Brown
RE: "Putting Women's Concerns on the Political Agenda"

This is another in a series of updates about interesting initiatives to promote women's political participation.

Summary

The Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) is a nongovernmental organization devoted to action research on policy issues which have an impact on women. During the Parliamentary elections of 1995, GDRI played an active role in promoting women's issues, both to the candidates and to the electorate. With the dissolution of the existing Parliament on May 19, 1995, and new elections set for July 2, 1995, GDRI had only 44 days in which to accomplish its goal of increasing women's participation in Thailand's government.

Status of Women

Despite the headway made in recent years, women who seek a more prominent role in the political system have many obstacles to overcome. Often, female candidates have difficulty breaking away from traditional stereotypes which restrict women's role to a family setting. For generations, women have been viewed as subordinate to men, thus they have experienced resistance by attempting to enter a field considered suitable for men only. The resulting political culture, as cultivated by men, contributes further to the alienation of women from the political sphere. In addition, the responsibilities women have toward the family and the home under the traditional social structures have deprived them of the opportunity to pursue a political career. Finally, women's inferior social standing combined with few education opportunities has relegated many women to a state of economic dependency on men. Although recent years have seen an increased number of women appear on Thailand's political stage, the women to men ratio in Parliament remains staggeringly low. Since 1933, less than 3 percent of all elected parliamentarians have been women. In order to help women overcome these challenges, GDRI embarked on a campaign to promote female candidates and to address areas of concern for women.

Goals

GDRI prepared for the campaign by highlighting three objectives:

- to promote qualified women's candidacy for Parliament;
- to make women voters aware of the importance of their vote and to encourage them to exercise their voting rights;
- to include women's concerns in the policy of political parties

GDRI also campaigned to bring women's issues to the foreground during the election. Although women have many concerns, four issues were given top priority.

- Participation in the Formulation of Administrative and Development Policy
- Ratification of the Reservations on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

- encouragement given to women leaders to organize a forum with local election candidates, male and female, thus pressuring them towards a commitment to address women's issues;
- organization of a forum for political parties to state their policies on women.

Results

GDRI's efforts proved to be successful. Out of 227 female candidates, more than 10 percent were elected. In fact, the 1995 elections have brought more women into Thailand's Parliament than ever before.

Activities took place during the elections to influence both voters and candidates to recognize the importance of women's issues. Of the eligible voters in Thailand today, the overwhelming majority of them are women. Encouraging women to exercise the franchise, not only increases the chances of election for female candidates, it also shapes women into a dynamic force in Thai society.

Following the elections, GDRI, joined by eleven additional women's organizations, sent open letters to all party leaders encouraging them to address women's issues in their platform. Following the letter, Thailand's Prime Minister announced a specific policy on women that addressed many of GDRI's concerns.