THE NEGOTIATION OF WOMEN IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS IN THE DEEP SOUTH OF THAILAND

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Abstract

The violent conflict in the southern border provinces of Thailand has pushed women into the public sphere, either of necessity or voluntarily. However, women are not merely victims of conflict and violence but attempt to mitigate violence and resolve conflict in their communities. They are determined not only to protect their immediate families but also their society as a whole. The research question that motivates this study is what are the facilitating factors that enable women who live in conflict-prone areas to advance gender demands to engage with the peace process and to redress gender inequality although they do not have the authoritative power. This study draws on existing literature and in-depth interviews of 15 women peace activists and two male social activists. This study finds four facilitating factors that enable women to intervene in conflict and redress gender inequality: self-mobilization and visibility; knowledge and skills; outside influences; and the ability to strategize gender issues. Given limitations in power and the minor roles that women have on formal peacebuilding and political platforms, these assets make it possible for women's groups to leverage social change toward gender equality.

Keywords: Gender, Negotiation, Peacebuilding, Justice, Thailand

Introduction: Women's situation in the violent conflict in the South of Thailand

The current chapter of the ongoing violent conflict in the southernmost provinces (i.e. Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and four districts of Songkhla comprising Thepa, Chana, Na Thawi, and Saba Yoi) has persisted for more than a decade. Between January 2004 and November 2018, there were approximately 20,109 violent incidents, 6,903 deaths, and 13,488 injuries (Deep South Incident Database, 2018). A report by the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC) indicated that between the period of 2004-2017, 513 women were killed, 75 women maimed, and 1,704 injured as a result of shootings or bombings.

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The armed confrontation between the military and the opposition movement has broadened in scope and escalated into more deadly violence; more civilians have been killed, and public spaces including markets, hotels, schools, places of worship and hospitals were sporadically attacked (ibid; DSID, 2018). As a result, violent incidents (on average three per day) have destroyed women's sense of security in everyday life. Many women who have lost husbands are forced to become breadwinners, striving for economic survival for themselves and their dependents. It has been found that under armed conflict conditions, women have limited access to reproductive health and face unreported domestic violence (Kliangklao, 2013).

In February 2013, a peace dialogue between the Thai government and representatives of some, but not all, of the groups opposing the government (coalescing in 2015 under the name of MARA Patani) was initiated under Section 8 of the National Security Council's 2012-2014 Administration and Development Policy for the Southern Border Provinces. This policy sought to "encourage continuity of the peace dialogue processes with people who have different opinions and ideologies from the state and choose to use violence to fight against the state, as one of the stakeholders to the Southern Border Provinces' problems." Local residents hoped this dialogue would be a peaceful alternative to the deadly conflict. A recent peace survey found that 57 percent of people in the Deep South support dialogue and negotiation as a means to solve the conflict (Office of Peace and Governance, King Prajadhipok Institute 2017, p.41).

However, only 17% of respondents believe the government would be able to end the conflict (Ibid, p.13). According to the poll, 5.41% of respondents see women's groups as an essential social group among 12 groups that could contribute to achieving peace (ibid, pp.45).

Women's groups have been recognized and acknowledged as potential actors to build peace because they have been involved in peace activism since the unrest began in 2004, starting from self-help groups formed to help victims of violence. Today, women's groups are at the forefront of humanitarian assistance, human rights defenders and advocates for an end to the violent conflict. Under traditional gender norms in the southern border provinces women are typically expected to be housewives and confined within the private sphere. This paper will explore the efforts women have made to narrow the gender gap in the Deep South of Thailand.

Security and peace from a gender perspective

There is a growing acknowledgment that the singular dominance of the concept of negative peace (securing the absence of physical violence) restricts national security to a discourse conceptualized around militarism. This is not to say that military operations in ensuring a negative peace should be discarded. Instead, the limits of negative peace should be kept in mind. In order to ensure a sustainable peace, it is necessary for conflict workers and policymakers to comprehend different notions of peace within a national security

Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

68

discourse because peace is not merely an absence of violence but also the presence of social justice (Shields, 2017).

Reimann (1999) argues that if gender is ignored during an examination of the causes, courses, and endings of conflict, existing power structures would be left unexamined. The lived experiences of women and men in conflict and peacebuilding processes are to a degree distinct. In most countries, men are dominant in political establishments including peacebuilding processes. In the case of Thailand, the military controls the budget and personnel decisions (Asia Report N° 241, 2012; p.8). From 2004 to 2018 the total budget allocated to the southern border provinces' unrest was 290,901.6 million baht. In the 2018 fiscal year, the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) allocated 13,255.7 million baht to the Internal Security Command (ISOC) and the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC) (Isaranews, 2017). The peacebuilding agenda is driven by a militarism paradigm under a discourse of securitization focusing on ending violence – promoting a negative peace.

This study derives a concept of Feminist Security Studies (FSS) inspired by Tickner (1992); Sjoberg (2016); and Shepherd (2018) as its framework. They argue that in order to transform the protracted ethno-political conflict it is crucial to expand the security framework which includes security in the perimeter of everyday life. Since conflict has negative impacts on societies in many ways, especially residents' livelihoods and social relationships, it affects people's sense of security. In violent conflict,

women have to bear the burden of caring for orphans or persons with disabilities. They may have to take responsibility for their entire family after losing the heads of households. The consequences of the violence must be borne daily, not only during days of intense armed clashes or immediately following a death or injury in the household. Therefore, expanding the security framework cannot neglect gender. Gendered social norms determine that women and men have an unequal level of influence, decision-making power, and access to and control of various resources concerning peacebuilding policies, which in turn define the direction of conflict resolution policies and measures.

Since women's concerns about security involve the well-being of their immediate families and communities, they are therefore considered apolitical and marginalized from the formal peace process. In protracted conflicts around the world, the numbers of women who are motivated to end oppressive conditions affecting their security in everyday life are rising and they are engaging in peace activism outside the formal political space to bring about change (Lederach, 2005; Lederach & Lederach, 2010). Women in the southern border provinces of Thailand have the same experience. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to examine how women gain recognition as agents for social change and to explore women's strategies in negotiating their demands and visibility in the peace process in the Deep South of Thailand.

Research methods

This phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of women

under a condition of ongoing deadly conflict in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. The women in this study are residents who have engaged in peace, human rights, and political activism from 2006 to 2018. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 women who have been involved in social activism aimed at transforming conflict and advancing women's status. Two men who have observed women's involvement in public affairs were interviewed. The informants were from three southern border provinces i.e. Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. Inductive coding was used to cluster findings into themes. The gender perspective and the concept of feminist security are employed as analytical frameworks.

The following discussion presents: 1) findings on women's roles in peacebuilding; 2) a discussion, based on the findings, on the facilitating factors that contribute to women's negotiation power to bring gender issues to public attention; and 3) a conclusion.

Findings: Women's roles in building negative and positive peace

a) Women Protecting Kinship

Since the resistance movements have operated underground, in many deadly violent incidents the perpetrators could not be identified. The situation is even more confused as the military was often suspected of carrying out violent incidents, as some residents have witnessed the perpetrators wearing paramilitary uniforms. For instance, in an incident on 20 September 2005, Muslim women in Tanyonglimo village, Ranae District, Narathiwat Province, took hostage two soldiers in plain clothes. The villagers suspected the soldiers of involvement in a shooting at a tea shop that wounded five villagers. Later, the two soldiers were stabbed to death by two unidentified men. In this incident, the women were not seen as perpetrators of violence but rather victims of the chaos (Peace Witness Volunteer Project, 2009).

Other groups of women who have been affected by violence include, first, those whose immediate male family members were killed or injured by violent incidents and who have had to become breadwinners after losing the heads of households and care providers for family members disabled as a result of violence. The second are women whose immediate family members face charges of security offenses. They also have to become heads of households and take care of the wellbeing of their families in the place of their husbands. Some have to face exclusion by neighbours and relatives who may fear accusations of involvement with the insurgents. Both groups have gained assistance from outsiders and later formed self-help groups and an informal network for mental and social healing, including economic resilience. Group formation and networking have become a crucial source of power for women to mitigate the impact of violence. As a result, some among these victims receiving humanitarian aid and psychological healing turned into social workers and human rights defenders, forming voluntary groups or joining relevant organizations. They are equipped with knowledge and skills on non-violent action, dialogue facilitation, special laws used in the area, the international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights

Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

70

frameworks. This enables them to extend assistance to others in need, advocate human rights, and promote peace and reconciliation.

People in the Deep South have been affected not only by the violence but also by government conflict resolution measures, especially the hard-line policies imposed since the conflict began. The government has enforced three special security laws to counter the insurgency in the South. The 1914 Martial Law Act, first imposed in January 2004 then replaced in July 2005 by the 2005 Executive Decree on Government Administration in the States of Emergency. Martial Law was re-imposed after the coup d'état in 2006 and the 2008 Internal Security Act is now in force in all conflict-prone areas. These special laws allow military officials to hold suspects without charge for at least 37 days, thereby granting excessive power and fostering impunity for officials from civil or criminal prosecution (Asia Report N° 241, 2012, p.10). Hardline policies in security operations inevitably risk human rights abuses. According to a 2009 AHRC report, military security operations included "sweeping operations" into villages suspected of harbouring insurgents. As a result, hundreds of Muslim men were taken away from home for four months in re-education camps run by the military. There also are reports of torture during the interrogation of suspects (Amnesty International, 2009). Women gained and developed legal and human rights knowledge from local lawyers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This knowledge empowered women to stop being submissive and fearful, and made them capable of asserting and defending their male family members' rights (Peace Witness Volunteer Project, 2009).

b) Women Advocating Public Safety Zones and Enhancing Women's Participation

Almost a decade after the conflict erupted, women no longer tolerate a hopeless situation of endless violence. Twenty-three groups of women joined hand to form the Peace Agenda of Women (PAOW) network on April 28, 2015. Their main objectives are first, a demand for all armed forces on both sides to cease violence, beginning with public spaces e.g. schools, hospitals, places of worship and markets, and second a demand for women's involvement in the formal peace dialogue process, started during the Yingluck Shinawatra administration in February 2013.

Women's groups demonstrated their support for and readiness to take part in the peace dialogue (Todong, 2013). The Thai and the BRN dialogue delegations had no objection to women's involvement in the peace process (Samoh, 2013). Informally, away from the dialogue table, they admired women's roles in peacebuilding but have no formal procedure to include women in the peace dialogue process. The principle dialogue parties agreed to include the safety zone issue on the official agenda by testing the possibility of designating a particular safety zone as part of confidence-building measures, and to show whether the resistance movement has real control over militia forces on the ground. However, this notion is absolutely different from what the women proposed. Therefore, the Women's Peace Network advocated a public safety zone outside the peace dialogue platform.

Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

71

Meanwhile, they attempted to recommend a policy or mechanism to ensure women's voices and needs are heard and taken into account in the dialogue process.

In order to enhance women's participation in the peace process, the Women's Peace Network has cultivated resources and support to establish their legitimate power by connecting with international organizations such as UN Women, Oxfam, and IRRC. They also work closely with local CSOs and national NGOs, including media and academia, to support their activities and advocate women's participation in the peace process. Currently, women are attempting to engage in formal politics. As the general election approached some Muslim women in the peace movement ran for election somewhat against traditional gender norms. Ms. Pateemoh Pohitaedaoh (2018), a founder of the PAOW and chairperson of the Women for Peace Association, wants to determine her own future in the south and to ensure that political parties have specific policies on women living in the Deep South conflict-prone area. Ms. Pateemoh was a party list candidate in the 2019 general election and stated: "Some people still believe that politics is not for women. Women's engagement in politics is haram (prohibited). I do not want women's capacity to be overlooked. Women can take part in social development and solve social problems, building peace for our future."

c) Women Demanding Redress for Gender Inequality

Gender issues, such as child marriage, domestic violence, and sexual abuse and discrimination that have long been covered up, are only recently emerging. A remarkable public discussion of a previously taboo gender issue is the recent case of child marriage between a 40-year-old man from Malaysia and an 11-year-old child from Narathiwat Province in Thailand. In the Deep South, where Muslims comprise approximately 80% of the population, the Islamic law is used in family matters and inheritance instead of the Civil Code. As a result, as many as 24% of girls in the South are married after their first menstrual period (Asianews, 2018). Moreover, some experience rape and are then forced to marry the perpetrators (National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRC), 2018).

The Southern Women Overcoming Violence Network is the very first women's organization working on the violence against women issue since 2007. In 2017 the organization succeed in encouraging and assisting the Narathiwat Provincial Islamic Committee to establish the first special unit in the area run by women to provide counselling services to assist women who have family issues and are victims of domestic violence. Its chair, Ms. Rosidah Pusu states: "It was around 2017 that gender issues became a topic of public discussion. Gender-based violence and domestic violence have gradually attracted the attention of researchers and academics. Before the violent conflict (between the Thai government and the resistance movement) they had been the centre of focus" (personal communication, March 18, 2019). This echoes an observation made by Mr. Muhammadayub Pathan, Chair of the Civil Society Council of Southern Thailand. From his point of view, this might be because "in

Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

72

this recent decade, Muslim society in the South has increasingly opened up to the outside world" (personal communication, March 2, 2019).

Discussion: Women's Negotiating Power for Participation in the Peace Process and Enhancing Gender Justice

From the findings above, there are four facilitating factors that make it possible for women who have been marginalized from formal peacebuilding projects to negotiate for peace and gender justice: a) self-mobilization; b) knowledge and skills; c) outside influence; d) ability to articulate gender issues.

a) Self-mobilization and visibility

In the context of the South, traditional gender norms have confined women within the private sphere (Marddent, Pollachom & Promrat, 2019). However, after the conflict erupted, a large number of women became engaged in the public sphere. One explanation sees that a facilitating factor paving the way for women's involvement in the peace project is women being Muslimah – a good Muslim, which is identical to being a good mother, a good wife and a "good woman" (Umar, 2015). Portrayal as a good Muslim is not the only source of power women have used to negotiate their demands and rights. However, this can also be a way of controlling women. A recent research study finds that women cannot engage in social activism because of the notion that a "good woman" is supposed to obey and be under the control of the husband and to give priority to providing care for the household

(Marddent et al., 2019). The "good woman" concept is a significant barrier to women negotiating activism in the public sphere (Ms. Lamai Manakarn, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

According to Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall (2016), the visibility of women as active participants is the first necessary stage to redress unjust power relations in the conflict situation. Women have different experiences from men in conflict and its resolution. Moreover, the deformation of households and livelihoods in the environment of economic insecurity leads women to demand recognition and involvement in the peace process. In expressing themselves as a movement, women have a new portrayal as peace activists who aim at promoting social change for the common good. This new identity generates a substantive change in gender awareness and power relations (Moser & Clark, 2001). The image of social agents unrelated to the traditional role of a "good woman" provides a more substantial opportunity for women because tradition stresses women's nurturing roles, close to the patriarchal definition (ibid, p.24). Moreover, without religious demarcation, the women's peace movement would have a better chance of attracting a diverse group of women participants, which is important to the legitimacy of women's representation.

b) Knowledge and skills

The ongoing conflict in the Southernmost of Thailand has had the effect of significantly increasing the number of women human rights defenders and peace activists over time. Female human rights

Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

73

defenders were encouraged by the fact that men would be at a higher risk if they engaged in human rights advocacy. Some women developed skills and knowledge during the time they attempted to stay informed about their immediate family members, either husbands or sons when they were prosecuted on security charges (Charoenpolpiriya & Sombatpoonsiri, 2009). The knowledge and skills included relevant laws and mechanisms, including the Thai language as some of them speak the Melayu language in their daily life (Buranajaroenkij, Suwanbubha & Yimyong, 2017).

However, many are novice activists without experience in social activism as before the conflict erupted in 2004, they were merely housewives. Since the establishment in 2015 of the Peace Agenda of Women (PAOW) comprising 23 organizations or groups of victims of violence and social workers, acquiring the potential to be effective peace activists requires a special set of skills and knowledge, including opportunities to gain first-hand experience in activism to sharpen their skills (Ms. Soraya Jamjuree, personal communication, April 26, 2017). We cannot make the assumption that women are naturally peaceful (Porter, 2012); it is a matter of choice and determination. In a cross-country study examining 200 rebel movements active between 1979 and 2009 conducted by Thomas & Wood (2017), it was discovered that women demand gender equality so they can seek available opportunities to participate in fighting forces where they can enhance their political efficacy and agency, believing that it could narrow the gender gap. This is apparently contradicted by the Thailand case.

Knowledge of human rights and skills in working with conflict enable women to assume roles in promoting social justice and transforming conflict. In the Deep South of Thailand, women facilitated dialogue between the military and villagers to reduce tension and promote understanding between the two parties. Women have a firm position on promoting social reconciliation and are against all forms of violence. Their multi-party position and ability to work with all actors and stakeholders enables them to gain trust from diverse social groups ranging from sympathizers of the Thai government to the resistance movement, from the government to normal residents. The clear evidence is that both principal peace dialogue delegations, the government and the resistance movement, have made receptive gestures toward the proposal of the women's movement.

c) Outside influences

The third facilitating factor enabling the women's movement to negotiate for gender equality is support from actors outside the conflict area and influence at the international level. Women's groups have been supported by international organizations and international non-governmental organizations with knowledge on e.g. human rights, gender, and IHL. Academic institutions have supported women's groups with empirical studies to shed light on women's voices and roles, including women's participation in advocacy in the peace process.

Also gender issues that have long been under the carpet in the South such as the case of child marriage between a Malaysian

man and a girl from Thailand opened an opportunity for women's groups in Thailand to pressure the Central Islamic Council of Thailand to pay attention. Ms. Fareeda Panjor alleges that this issue has been received not because of a fundamental change within Muslim society, but because of outside factors (personal communication on February 8, 2019). Ms. Fareeda's observation is that the case gained public attention and created an impact because of its internationalization. Child marriage is prohibited in Malaysia, and marrying a girl under 16 is made possible only with the permission of a religious or sharia court (Lamb, 2018). Since the case gained public attention in Malaysia, it shed light on an issue which has long been hidden in the Muslim community in the South. Consequently, in December 2018, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand issue a regulation demanding local mosques not to authorize the marriage of a person under the age of 17, except in special circumstances. Even though at the moment there is no guarantee that implementation will be effective, this change is considered a crucial step in protecting the human rights of girl children.

d) Ability to strategize gender issues

There are NGOs in the Deep South applying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), mainly to advocate an end to violence against women but not to promote women's participation in politics and the peace process. In 2016, more than 10 years after violence erupted, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security drafted a concept paper entitled "Measures

and Guidelines on Women and the Promotion of Peace and Security" using the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 which Thailand has not ratified given the situation where the government avoids internationalizing the conflict.

The findings reveal women's capability to politicize gender issues both from the experience of living in a violent conflict situation and in their everyday lives. They use a compromise approach to avoid unnecessary resistance that may happen in a patriarchal context. Women's groups have prioritized public safe spaces as their main agenda item for the peace process. Women's groups also able to grasp the situation where change can be made, for instance the issue of child marriage. At the beginning of the Women's Peace Movement, they occasionally demanded publicly a seat in the peace process mechanism without mentioning the number or the percentage of women's participation. But lately, at a meeting held on March 12, 2019 by the Civil Society Organization Council in the Southern Border Provinces, a representative of the Women's Peace Network stated a demand for 50% women's participation in all mechanisms of the peace process and local administration.

Apparently, women's groups in the Deep South have gradually created informal "advocacy space" which is crucial for the advancement of human rights (Moser & Clark, 2001). They learned lessons from past mistakes and improved their strategies over time. They are not limited to working among themselves but extend their network to ally with powerful men (e.g. religious leaders,

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75

politicians and social activists). They keep these men informed about the goals and objectives of their activism, including exchanges of ideas to improve their network. They found these strategies of keeping potential actors informed is important and could reduce potential resistance (Ms. Lamai Manakarn, personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Women's organizations and peace movements in the southern provinces have not emphasized the number of women in the peace process. They prioritize the knowledge and skills necessary to promote social justice and security in everyday life. Some organizations even deliberately refrain from using the terms "feminism" and "gender" in their advocacy (Rosida Pusu, personal communication, April 27, 2017). In some countries, campaigning for women's human rights might be crucial to increasing women's participation. But in the Deep South, strategically contextualized campaigns have been recommended. As Ms. Fareeda states "If women's groups focus on recognition and enhancement of women's participation, it is likely to cause social friction. Engaging in common issues of public concern would make dominant actors and other women more receptive to demands and proposals made by women's groups. Public issues could include education, the environment or politics where women can integrate gender perspectives – paying attention to all sexes and marginalized social groups - not limited merely to issues that affect women" (personal communication, February 8, 2019).

All these four facilitating factors are interweaved and complementary. In other words, all of these factors contribute to the success of women's groups. These become an asset of women in the Deep South to redress gender inequality. Given limitations in power and minor roles on formal peacebuilding and political platforms, women have accumulated social capital, e.g. alliances, knowledge, skills and public attention that make it possible for women's groups to leverage social change toward gender equality. However, these facilitating factors are not institutionalized and are not sustainable, as some of the gains were due to a single event – such as the change in child marriage regulations by the Central Islamic Council of Thailand. There are no formal measures to address all gender issues or to ensure redress for gender inequality.

Conclusion

In many societies, conflict and the peace process provides an opportunity for freedom from gender inequality, when women's participation and gender mainstreaming are acceptable to the peace process and political establishment. This paper discovers a glimpse of an opportunity for change toward gender equality in the conflict-prone area of Thailand.

The findings reveal facilitating factors that enhance the negotiation power of women in the Deep South. The facilitating factors include changes in the social and political context that allow women's self-mobilization for mass action and networking, and the accumulation of knowledge and skills that enable women to intervene in the conflict and articulate their demands. These factors contribute to women's success both in asserting a gender-sensitive agenda into the peace dialogue process and in beginning to

Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

76

redress some traditional gender practices that have long been put aside in the Southern Border Provinces. Moreover, the findings suggest that it is crucial to institutionalize women's roles and participation in order to sustain peace. This resonances with the study of the activity of peace movements working on a culture of war over fifty years conducted by Elise Boulding (as cited in Ramsbotham et al, 2016; p.307) which argues that energies and resources for peace culture to be cultivated in a society are nourished by communal and collective visions of how things might be. Therefore, mainstreaming gender perspectives in the policy implications of peacebuilding projects is essential.

On the pathways toward sustainable peace, gender is a crucial component. Because the implication of gender in the conflict and its resolution illuminates its important role in social power relations. Therefore, all stakeholders in the peace process need to pay attention to power relations, especially gendered relations, at every level of social relations. In order to build a just, inclusive and peaceful society, it is necessary to expand the notion of security beyond nationalism and militarism toward human security in respect of women's demands for security, peace and gender justice (Sjoberg, 2016; Shepherd, 2018).

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77

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79

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Official Journal of National Research Council of Thailand in Conjunction with the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University

80