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# Gender mainstreaming in government offices in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos: perspectives from below

Kyoko Kusakabe

*In this article, I aim to examine the ways in which gender concerns have been 'mainstreamed' into government activities. I focus on three countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region: Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. While gender mainstreaming policies are in place at the national level in these countries, the 'evaporation' (Longwe 1995) of such policies at the lower levels has been a problem. The article concentrates on challenges of implementation which exist at provincial/commune and department levels. Drawing on the experience of middle- and low-level government officers, I argue here that policy evaporation occurs partly because of lack of political commitment to gender mainstreaming at different levels. Another problem is that the concept of gender mainstreaming itself remains vague, and is thus difficult to translate into action.*

In 1997, the Economic and Social Council of the UN defined gender mainstreaming as, first, the *process* of assessing the implications of any planned action for both women and men. Second, it is a *strategy* for making women's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and social spheres, ensuring that women benefit equally with men.<sup>1</sup>

In the last few decades, various approaches to gender mainstreaming have been developed and implemented in different countries and organisational settings. These have included appointing gender focal points among staff; conducting training in gender sensitivity and gender analytical skills; developing gender policies and methods of gender-responsive planning; and carrying out gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation, through identifying gender indicators, collecting gender-disaggregated data, and, recently, gender budget analysis.

Many problems regarding gender mainstreaming have already been identified by practitioners and scholars alike (for example, Rai 2003; Goetz 2001; Miller and Razavi, 1998). Problems include the weak influencing power commanded by gender focal points, lack of resources, the evaporation of gender policies when it comes to implementation, and the difficulty of gender mainstreaming in the face of gender-biased organisational culture and discourse. Some scholars have even questioned whether gender mainstreaming is co-opting the feminist agenda, instrumentalising and diluting it, and thus doing more harm than good for gender equality (Standing 2004; Miller and Razavi, 1998).

In this article, I briefly survey the efforts made to address gender issues in government offices, in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. These cases may not be representative of the overall effort that is taking place in these countries. However, it is hoped that they will serve as food for thought. In particular, they highlight the

need to give more attention to the importance of the activities of middle and lower field-level government officers.

## Cambodia

Cambodia was under socialist rule from 1979 to 1993. Under the socialist system, Cambodia had a Women's Association of Cambodia (WAC) — a mass organisation of the socialist government, which extended from central to village level. It was involved not only in political campaigning, but also in relief work, especially supporting poor widows, and destitute women.

In 1993, when Cambodia abandoned socialism for democracy, a Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs was established immediately after the first general election. The Secretariat was later upgraded to a Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Many former WAC staff members were absorbed into the structure of the Provincial Department of Women's Affairs, which operated in the provinces under the Ministry of Women's Affairs. In 1999, the Ministry produced a five-year strategic plan, *Neary Rattanak*.<sup>3</sup> In this, it defined a policy advisory role for itself on gender issues in relation to all line ministries, local government, and public institutions. The direct social-service delivery function inherited from WAC was abandoned. Due to a lack of national funds, almost the entire budget for implementation of activities of the Ministry of Women's Affairs comes from international project support.

There are four major types of gender mainstreaming activities that have been carried out by the Provincial Department of Women's Affairs (PDWA), with technical support from the Ministry. These are: gender training; working with gender focal points in government ministries; giving input into planning in ministries; and information sharing and awareness raising about women-specific issues, including violence against women.

Gender training has been conducted at all levels from the Provincial Department staff to villagers. In general, I found that people expressed discomfort about training their peers, even within the Ministry, preferring to train people whom they perceived as lower in status than they were. The Ministry trained trainers who are now based in the Provincial Department, with the aim that they would, in turn, train district, commune, and village-level people. However, the training occurs only when and where there are funds available from donors. Often, gender training is the sole gender activity undertaken at community level.

There is no doubt that gender training is important, but activities and achievements beyond training were not often found.<sup>4</sup> The heavy focus on gender training was due to lack of clarity on the part of provincial and commune-level gender staff about their mandate to promote gender equality. Gender training is a concrete activity, in which they have experience, and are confident that they can do well. As a result, their activity report amounts to a list of training sessions, which they state had an underlying aim of covering all government staff and villages in the province.<sup>5</sup>

Gender focal points have been appointed in each Provincial Department of the other government ministries, and at the village commune level. In the ministries, gender focal points are mostly lower-level officers, and normally do not have any departmental budget allocated. The focal points were not chosen for their expertise on gender issues, but have undergone gender training. They have regular meetings with staff from the PDWA, but I found that the meetings did not always provide them with clear guidance about what they should be doing in their departments. At commune level, there is lack of knowledge of the existence of gender focal points. None of the women we interviewed in the villages even knew that there was a gender focal point in the commune council.

Frustration due to the lack of clarity in roles is felt within the commune, as well as by provincial level officers. One gender focal point in the commune council replied to our question on what she does as a gender focal point<sup>6</sup> as follows: *'I don't do anything, because there is no budget. I am not instructed from above what I should do. They (PDWA) sometimes give me posters for domestic violence and trafficking. I went to the villages to distribute these. Now it is finished. I have been to PDWA meeting several times. But it has now been a long time since I have last met them... No, no one in the villages comes to me to discuss about their problems...'*

Lack of concrete work beyond gender training, and lack of clarity on the mandate of gender focal points, means that staff acting as gender focal points are often not assessed positively on their performance by colleagues. One male officer at commune level said: *'Yes, we have a gender focal point. But I do not know what she is doing. She does not come to office regularly. She is busy'*. Such statements that they do not know what the gender officer is doing, and their perception that gender officers are busy or sick, implies that male officers view gender officers as not productive, and not contributing to the activities of the council.

Participation of the PDWA in the planning process of government departments was achieved at two levels. Within government ministries, staff participated directly in meetings or supported gender focal points to give input. At local level, planning is carried out by commune councils, and includes a series of discussions with villagers.<sup>7</sup> Final decisions on development activities that are to be implemented are made at the district integration workshop. Here commune councils discuss their plan with provincial/district departments, as well as other organisations working in the area. The PDWA fed into this local planning in various ways, including supporting the gender focal points in the commune council to raise gender issues, and (with the Ministry for Women's Affairs)

developing a gender mainstreaming checklist to be used during the planning process. The checklist reminds planners to consider whether women will be able to participate in, and benefit from, proposed activities.<sup>8</sup>

There are significant challenges involved in undertaking these activities. In order for the PDWA to provide necessary inputs to other departments' plans, it needs extensive knowledge of other sectors' work, in addition to knowledge and experience of planning. If the gender focal points are to carry out the work, they need knowledge of the gender issues relating to their particular sphere of work. Often, their level of knowledge makes it impossible to do anything beyond noting and reporting on the number of women participants in commune activities. However, it would not be fair to conclude that the difficulties that PDWA and commune gender focal points have in raising gender issues in planning processes arise merely from their lack of knowledge. It is unrealistic to expect the provincial and commune-level gender focal points to have a profound ability in policy analysis and planning, especially with the absence of any technical and political support. Lack of financial resources for gender focal points discourages attempts to take more innovative or proactive actions, and also contributes to their low status in the province and commune. But without opportunities to discuss their ideas and without support for translating their ideas into action, it is difficult to come up with activities beyond training, even if there is a budget.

The final activity of PDWA is to disseminate information on gender issues, and run awareness-raising activities in communities, on issues such as domestic violence. Despite the policy of no direct implementation of projects in communities, field-level activities are carried out by PDWA on women-specific problems such as domestic violence, trafficking of women and children, and vocational training and skill

improvement for women. These activities are often carried out with enthusiasm, and there is increased awareness of issues like domestic violence and trafficking of women and children.<sup>9</sup> However, these activities are often implemented separately by PDWA and gender focal points at commune level, and do not necessarily lead to or influence the way they work with other departments and other commune council members.

Overall, the Cambodia case suggests that the gender mainstreaming process is understood in vague terms. As a result of successful gender training, awareness and willingness to work on gender issues is high among provincial/commune-level government officers. However, concrete activities that should take place are unclear, and thus people who want to work on gender issues are discouraged and lose momentum.

### **Lao People's Democratic Republic**

Lao PDR has a Women's Union: a mass organisation under the socialist government. In the beginning, its focus was to promote traditional gender norms, and it concentrated on national security (Saphakdy 2005). It was given a wider mandate in 1991, when its role in promoting the equal rights and advancement of women, and responding to women's needs, was recognised under the Constitution. In 1993, at its Third National Congress, Lao Women's Union adopted a commitment to gender awareness and equity.

As one of the two institutions in Lao PDR<sup>10</sup> formally recognised as having responsibility for advocating women's rights and gender concerns, the Women's Union has a unique opportunity to influence the policies, plans, and practices of both government and non-government organisations. One of the strengths of the Women's Union is that it has a strong network from the national to the village level. Although membership to the Union is automatic after

a Lao woman reaches 17 years old, the active members are the elected representatives of villages. Some Women's Union village representatives are active, and work diligently as volunteers. However, since most of the work of the Women's Union is unpaid and time-consuming, some representatives feel over-burdened.<sup>11</sup>

In most development projects in Lao PDR, Women's Union provincial and district staff are put in charge of women's concerns or gender issues. For example, in an integrated rural development project in Northern Lao PDR,<sup>12</sup> a Women's Union officer, seconded to the project, was in charge of both micro-credit and gender issues. This particular project was successful in supporting women's weaving activities, which led to a large increase in household cash income. The Women's Union, with its vast network in the village level, could expand the scale of project activities much faster than any other component of the project. However, later on, the price of woven cloth dropped, and the activity became less lucrative. At the same time, export tax was introduced, further adversely affecting the weaving industry. Although the weaving activity was successful at the beginning, in the absence of co-ordinated support by the State for the activity, the women weavers were left at the mercy of the market. The support for weaving was confined to the Women's Union, and was not integrated into other sectors such as finance, commerce, and agriculture. As a result, timely support for export of woven cloth or alternative employment for women was lacking.

Another example of an activity of the Women's Union comes from the Governance and Public Administration Reform (GPAR) project in Luang Prabang. The GPAR project began in 2002. It aims to improve governance through enhancement of human-resources management, financial management, office environment, planning and co-ordination, and service delivery

capacity. Project documents specify that the project will work closely with the Gender Resource Information Development Centre of the Women's Union, and will take gender issues into consideration. The need to increase the number of women in responsible positions, and to give training and development opportunities for women, was specified in the documents. However, when translated into action, the only activity that was carried out under gender mainstreaming was two gender training sessions (Saphakdy 2005).<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on awareness raising indicates the project's underlying assumption that if officers are informed of gender concepts, they will be more sympathetic and co-operative towards gender initiatives and will also take up gender-responsive activities. However, Saphakdy's study (2005) shows that there is no relation between a positive attitude towards gender equality initiatives and the number of times individuals have attended gender training.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the training provided for them was focused on awareness raising and did not provide them with concrete ideas on what to do in the field or in the workplace.

The Lao case shows that having a nationwide women's network does not necessarily carry the message of gender equality throughout society. It also does not make it easier for gender issues to be incorporated into the work of various sectors and departments. Moreover, the legacy of mobilising women for national goals, without challenging traditional gender norms, has been hard to remove from the organisational culture of the Women's Union. The former focus of the Union was to support nation building. Such efforts to bring women to contribute to certain causes can be easily shifted towards a focus on women contributing to the well-being of the family/community or to national economic development. However, it is more difficult to shift to the ideology of protecting

women's rights and the political process of changes in gender relations. The change in direction of the Women's Union discussed above is not necessarily understood or agreed by all its members. Therefore, the Women's Union network itself does not necessarily lead to the initiation of a political process for gender mainstreaming.

## **Thailand**

In Thailand, the first official national mechanism for advancement of women — the Office of the National Commission on Women's Affairs (ONCWA) — was set up in 1989 under the Prime Minister's Office. In 2002, ONCWA was transferred to the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. It was combined with the Family Development Office, and the new body was named the Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development (Tamthai 2005).

As part of its effort to mainstream gender concerns in all ministries and departments, Chief Gender Equality Officers (CGEOs) have been appointed in all government agencies, at both ministry and department levels. CGEOs are to oversee gender integration in policy and planning processes in their respective government departments (Bhongsvej and Putananusorn 2003).

In the case of the Department of Fisheries (DoF), the Director of the Personnel Division was appointed as CGEO. His work started with collecting gender-disaggregated data on the staff working in the Department. During a workshop with DoF officers, it was repeatedly emphasised that integrating gender perspectives is the policy of the Department, even though there is no written policy to this effect yet. The Department is active in the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Fisheries Programme, which itself has a gender policy and strategy. This promotes gender-disaggregated data collection, and supports the Regional Network for Promotion of Gender in

Fisheries (RNPGF) (Sriputinibondh *et al.* 2004). Until quite recently, the CGEO did not have any link with the RNPGF.

In the Inland Fisheries Research and Development Bureau of DoF, there are two people who are directly involved in the RNPGF. Within DoF, these national network co-ordinators have not been given the human and financial resources to work on gender mainstreaming. They have attended regional trainings and workshops, conducted several research activities, presented research on gender issues in national fisheries conferences, and held workshops with DoF staff who are interested in gender issues. Yet currently, the designated research areas in the Department focus on areas such as aquaculture and fisheries management, but do not cover areas of research on social issues. This means that even if DoF researchers examine social issues related to fisheries and aquaculture, this is not recognised as an achievement relevant to assessing individual staff members for performance or promotion. As a result, there is no great incentive to carry out research on gender-related topics in DoF.

There is clearly a mismatch between knowledge, skills, connections, motivation, and position inside DoF for gender mainstreaming. Additionally, there is a general understanding that even though taking gender concerns into consideration is a policy of the Department, it is not a main priority. All this makes it difficult for those who are motivated to mainstream gender to bring about further achievements and changes. Better co-ordination to overcome the mismatch, empowerment of lower-level officers to voice their needs and ideas for change, and recognition and rewarding of initiatives, could all improve the motivation of staff. Lobbying for the opportunity to do social science related research needs to be done internally through the co-ordination and co-operation of people with different skills, knowledge, and positions.<sup>15</sup> If social issues relating to fisheries and aquaculture

were on the agenda, this would allow officers to integrate gender concerns into their daily work.

## Conclusion

Below, I summarise some of the many learning points which emerge from the three case studies.

### *The importance of national policies to local-level implementation*

In the three countries studied, at the national level there are gender mainstreaming structures in place, including gender focal points, national machinery for the advancement of women, gender units, and gender policy. This article, however, focused on gender mainstreaming processes at the department and provincial/commune level — which has attracted relatively less attention in the gender mainstreaming debate — to trace what has happened at this level. The importance of establishing national-level policies on gender equality is well recognised in bureaucracies. The logic is that if policy, practices, procedures, and incentive structures change at national level, it will be relatively easy to effect similar changes at the lower levels of government. Yet the cases show that the existence of national-level policies and strategies for mainstreaming do not necessarily ensure implementation at the departmental and provincial/commune level. I have argued that one of the barriers to mainstreaming a concern for gender equality in the government bureaucracies studied is that the realities of middle- and lower-level government officers are often neglected. The lower-level officers are the ones who are directly in contact with village women and men, but what they should be doing is often not stipulated. Less effort is focused towards them and their daily work than towards national-level work on developing gender policy, reforming organisational

structure, and running gender training sessions.

***New institutional structures for gender mainstreaming: the pros and the cons***

In Lao PDR, the Lao Women's Union is seen as the organisation responsible for gender mainstreaming. Even though Lao does not have a large NGO population, the Women's Union is able to reach out and mobilise a large number of women, since it is a mass organisation with a long history (established in 1955). However, this long history in itself presents challenges for the Union's transformation into an organisation with a mandate to promote gender equality in all spheres of life. This transition is difficult. Given the sector-based planning practices of government in Lao PDR, and its new mandate, the Women's Union needs to work with other departments to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed into their work. But because the Women's Union is a well-established institution, with independent work that it has been doing for decades, and because other sectors also do not see the need to change the way they work, it is difficult to adjust to performing this new role. It is even more difficult for the lower-level Union officers. They still feel they lack clarity regarding their gender mainstreaming roles, and the relationships that they should be forging with colleagues in other government departments.

In contrast, Cambodia created a new institution for gender mainstreaming. But the process of transition from socialism spelled the end of the women's association set up under the socialist system. This led to the loss of the nationwide network of women which had been a feature of the association. The case study emphasised that the new institution has to depend on other government departments to influence its agenda and facilitate contact with its constituency of grassroots women. These departments have extension officers in the

field, for reaching out at the village level, while PDWA does not. Most gender mainstreaming discourse remains at the philosophical level, and is not being translated into concrete action at the field level. Not being able to work and show concrete achievements gives a negative impression to their colleagues in the commune. This, together with the budgetary constraints discussed earlier, leaves field-level gender officers with low self-esteem and status.

***Challenges concerning the donor-driven nature of gender mainstreaming***

In Cambodia and Lao PDR, gender mainstreaming is often donor-driven. The sustainability of the initiative as the consequence of donor dependence is one problem. Another problem is that the opportunities provided by these donor-driven initiatives are not translated into routine procedures in government offices. Especially among the lower-level government officers, there are problems in identifying what should be done in practical terms. Often, people are left trying to work this out on their own.

***Gender training as the sole or main activity in gender mainstreaming***

The case studies provided evidence of a very heavy emphasis on gender training in mainstreaming. In Cambodia and Lao PDR, with the support of donor agencies, gender training at the lower levels has been conducted, and gender is no longer a novel concept. Gender awareness has therefore been achieved to some extent. Although gender training may be necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure that gender concerns are mainstreamed into government bodies and their activities. Administering gender training can, indeed, even be seen as a strategy which enables those staff charged with gender mainstreaming to avoid addressing the reality of resistance to the idea that government should work to promote gender equality. Initially at least,

training presents an easy way out in these situations: the deadlock can be blamed on a lack of understanding and support from other members of the organisation and wider society, which can be 'solved' by training.<sup>16</sup>

It is important that other concrete activities for gender mainstreaming (especially routine activities) are introduced in the middle and lower levels of government. Ongoing small activities related to gender mainstreaming at the field level create a favourable environment to allow initiatives to grow. For example, regular home visits in communities/groups by technical staff, (such as district agriculture extension officers) can begin a process of transformation. Through discussion and consultations with poor village women, practical gender concerns and their links to unequal gender power relations emerge. Each visit can develop this dialogue. Such routine discussions by technical staff need to be accompanied by regular meetings with officers trained in, and in charge of, gender mainstreaming. Such initiatives already exist, or are planned, in many areas in each of the three countries. However, all will need formal recognition and reward. Routine, concrete actions in the field lead to better gender analysis, better planning, and improved clarity in the concept and meaning of gender mainstreaming.

#### ***Challenges in monitoring women's participation***

Beyond gender training, the only other activity commonly undertaken in the three countries is to promote women's participation in village and community meetings. All three countries have a large-scale involvement of women in productive activities — in fisheries, in agriculture, and in manufacturing work — but this is often on discriminating terms.<sup>17</sup> In addition, in all three countries women often participate in meetings already, either because they are required to,<sup>18</sup> or because women are at home more and thus more available than

men for meetings. Hence, promoting women's participation in productive and community work in the villages does not in itself challenge existing gender power relations as much as might be expected. While monitoring the quality of women's participation and taking steps to improve it might be a good strategy, in general the focus on participation remains quantitative. It is limited to documenting the number of female and male participants in different events. Better knowledge of the national and local contexts in countries on the part of all involved in gender mainstreaming, including international donors, is critical.

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**Notes**

- 1 Report of the Economic and Social Council for 1997, A/52/3, 18 September 1997, chapter 4 'Coordination Segment: Coordination of the policies and activities of the specialized agencies and other bodies of the United Nations system'. See [www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-3.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-3.htm)
- 2 It was renamed the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs in 1998, but in 2004 reverted to Ministry of Women's Affairs.
- 3 This may be translated from Khmer as 'women are precious gems'.
- 4 It is noted, however, that with the few resources allocated to gender activity, training is one of the limited options available.
- 5 Interview in Northwest Cambodia, December 2004.
- 6 Interview in Takeo Province, April 2004.
- 7 Cambodian administrative levels are village, commune, district, and province.
- 8 Interview with commune gender focal point in Northwest Cambodia, December 2004; and in Central Cambodia, April 2004.
- 9 Village leaders say that after the domestic violence training, domestic violence cases in the village decreased. However, this is often based on perceptions. Although many people know about the problem, the effect of training and campaigns on the actual, and not reported, number of domestic violence and trafficking cases is still not clear.
- 10 Lao National Commission for Advancement of Women is the other institution that has an official mandate for the advancement of women.
- 11 Unlike the village chief's work, the work assigned to Women's Union representatives is unpaid, tedious work, such as collecting contributions from each household for village ceremonies. Even though it does provide status in the village — since being a representative reflects other women's assessment that one has a good personality and economic standing — the workload can be so heavy that some representatives are not able to continue for long.
- 12 Study conducted in March 2000 and January 2001.
- 13 These two training sessions are those that were targeted at the staff members of the project. A gender component was developed in the village management training programme, and provided to senior officials in the village level.
- 14 Although there was little difference in attitudes among officers who received or did not receive gender training, Saphakdy reported village women expressing that their men are now more helpful at home. Saphakdy also noted that since there were only two gender trainings conducted during the project period, significant change in attitude might not be a realistic expectation. Gender training assessment in Cambodia (Kusakabe and Chim 1999) showed that there is a direct relation between the number of gender trainings organised and positive attitudes towards integrating gender issues in work. However, the number of gender trainings attended was related to the attendee's position: those who were working as gender officers or focal points received more training. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether it was the effect of the training or their positions which made them work more positively on gender issues.
- 15 The author would like to express her gratitude to Ms. Ubolratana Suntornratana for her input.

- 16 It is recognised also that gender training provides an incentive for officers to work positively on gender equality. In countries where government salaries are low, the per diem and travel allowance paid to them for participation in training is considered significant.
- 17 For example, men's wages are 23 per cent more than women's on average in Cambodia (Godfrey et al. 2001, 11). According to the 1998 salary survey by the National Statistics Office in Thailand, in enterprises of 1,000 persons and over, women were earning 59 per cent of men's income level, while for enterprise of 100–299 persons, the figure was 65.5 per cent.
- 18 In Lao villages, some make it a rule that any household that does not attend village meetings will be fined.

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