

Bemidji State University

**Honours Program**

**Economic Growth and Women's Education in Malaysia and Thailand**

A Thesis in

International Studies

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

April 2008

## **Introduction**

The Human Development Report, published annually under the auspice of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), identifies many dimensions beyond economic growth as pertinent and important to the development or “health” of a nation. Women’s education is an important indicator of development. In recent years, residents of the developed world have been likely to take women’s education or education in general, for granted. Girls have had equal access to education for at least a generation. Yet, today, there are about 800 million illiterate people in the world, two third of whom are women. In some societies, girls are denied access to a basic education, while their brothers may attend school. In much of the developing world, the barriers to female education are very pronounced, although they are slowly being broken down.

Malaysia and Thailand are two emerging “Cubs,” following in the footsteps of the Asian Tigers of Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. Throughout the seventies, eighties, and most of the nineties, the economic conditions in these countries were similar; both were considered newly industrializing countries (NICs), and maintained fairly high average annual economic growth rates, as measured by GDP. This paper will address the effects of rapid economic development from 1970 to 1997 on the position of women in Malaysia and Thailand to observe to what degree the benefits of economic development spread to women, using education, specifically literacy rates, as the dependent variable.

Several independent variables were studied to account for the differences in literacy rates in Malaysia and Thailand. Government educational policies especially those focusing on women and regional (primarily urban-rural) variations were examined. Differences in literacy due to cultural factors, such as ethnicity or traditional views of

women, and colonization legacies (or the lack of former colonization, as is the case in Thailand), and religion (Malaysia is primarily Muslim and Thailand is primarily Buddhist) may be explanations for differences in literacy rates between the two nations, as well.

The benefits to society of literate women have generally been agreed upon by researchers for the last 25 years, some of which include improved ability to take advantage of health care, increased ability to protect oneself from HIV, fewer and healthier children, lower infant and child mortality rates, better educated children, improved access to labor markets, higher wages, and ability to make better-informed decisions (UNFPA 2005). The following will be a summary of research discussing the development of and changes in thought, theory, and the focus of women's education in the developing world. Later, the particular situation of women's education in Malaysia and Thailand will be analyzed to determine if progress has been made in benefits to women in those societies. Studies like this one will provide the information needed to create programs and policies to further extend women's education and improve literacy rates of women; however, this analysis is specific to Malaysia and Thailand so care should be taken not to generalize about the situation of women in all developing countries. Further research is needed to do so and is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Literature Review**

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and well into the twenty-first century, major trends in research focused on the equal access to and availability of education for girls and women. *Women's Education in Developing Countries: Opportunities and Outcomes* by

Audrey Chapman Smock, published in 1981, addressed the outcomes of female exposure to education in four sectors of life: marriage and family patterns, women's (primarily nonagricultural sector) work participation, fertility behavior, and public participation. Smock compared women's roles and status in five countries (Kenya, Pakistan, Mexico, Ghana, and the Philippines) and found that in all countries, increased female education led to what most interpret as improvement of women's lives: "increased sharing of authority within the family, more continuous employment in professional and technical occupations, lower fertility patterns, and greater participation in social and political activities." She also noted exceptions to the trends and variations in the impact of education, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive and nationally or regionally customized education programs. For example, the kind of program implemented to educate primarily Muslim girls in Pakistan should differ in form and content from that implemented in largely Catholic Mexico, due to significant cultural differentials. Smock was careful to take into consideration that the findings in the US or Europe may not be indicative of patterns characterizing developing nations; modernized countries face issues of availability and quality of education while children in developing countries may never attend school at all. Smock came to the conclusion that educating women is necessary in the long run so that they will not be marked as "the second sex," but suggests that investments such as agricultural extension for females, population education and family planning services, and employment creation seem more likely to benefit women in the short term.

An article published in 1982 entitled *The Participation of Women in Education in the Third World* by Mary Jean Bowman and C. Arnold Anderson looked at female

participation in school and literacy rates in less developed countries. The article was primarily a descriptive study providing some basic background information about women's education in the third world. They looked at how far girls go in school and what they study, compared with boys. Their findings suggest that the gender gap in literacy is narrowing in successive age cohorts, and that the gap between urban and rural educational differences is narrowing as well, but that the timing and speed of the convergence of female literacy with male literacy depends on cultural heritage. The authors suggest that enrolment rates are more difficult to interpret than literacy rates, due to late entry or grade repetition. Bowman and Anderson were quite concerned with family perceptions of the advantages of sending their daughters to school. Will schooling have beneficial effects on job attainment, the acquisition of a "better" husband, quality of domestic life, a girl's personality development, and the well-being of her children? They suggest that educating girls will have social benefits but the costs are primarily private. In many cultures, girls help their mothers with domestic chores and caring for younger siblings while boys tend to work outside the home. The lost labor at home, in conjunction with often long distances to school, safety of female children in transit, and other perceived costs accrued from sending girls to school (such as the purchase of proper school uniforms) tend to discourage parents from sending daughters to school, though these issues seem to have less of an effect on their decision to educate sons. Also, tenuous links such as early marriage practices and the availability of female teachers in many cultures affected female enrolment. Although, in some cases, married girls remain in school for several years before their marriage is consummated, often taboos such as the moral corruption of adolescent girls, and distractions by education from wifely roles and

duties were taken into account. One rumor suggested that girls attending mission schools became barren. The availability or lack of female teachers in some areas is both a deterrent to educating daughters and an outcome of the lack of education of women. A female instructor, especially in Muslim countries, may ameliorate parental concerns about protective educational environments for their daughters. Unfortunately, it's a self-perpetuating problem; many parents don't send their daughters to school because they won't have female teacher so fewer women receive enough education to become teachers. The authors admit that these issues have tenuous links and uncertain correlations. Bowman and Anderson conclude that the next step in understanding the education of girls and women will require more studies looking at the factors that hasten or retard change, in reference to the proliferation and reduction of gender inequalities.

Rosemary T. Bellew and Elizabeth M. King published an article in 1993, *Educating Women: Lessons from Experience*, in which they evaluated some of the approaches taken by the governments of developing nations in the realm of education. They see closing the gender gap in primary school education as one of the most important first steps in improving education for women; their article examined the conditions under which such programs seemed to succeed or fail. The authors looked at approaches such as expanding access to schools, providing culturally appropriate facilities, recruiting female teachers, reducing the cost of education, and alleviating poverty. Bellew and King frequently found that merely building schools and hiring teachers does not always increase female enrolment in school, as were the cases in Egypt, Mali, and the Republic of Yemen. In the cases of Egypt and Mali, building enough schools to educate the population of school-aged children was not an adequate draw for enrolment. In Yemen,

the government tried to attract women to new vocational schools with industrial, agricultural, and commercial programs. By the end of the project trial, it was found that no women had enrolled in the industrial or agricultural programs and only 7% of the participants in the commercial program were female. Evaluations concluded that the project designers did not consider cultural preferences; women in Yemen do not work in agriculture or industry. In these three cases, governments failed to take into consideration parents' worries about the safety of their daughters, high direct and opportunity costs with too few benefits, cultural preferences and norms, and the economy when designing programs or implementing policies to increase female participation in education.

Efforts to provide culturally appropriate education for girls such as segregation of girls and boys in school, closed latrine facilities, and the expansion of Koranic schools have been undertaken in parts of the Middle East, North Africa, East and South Asia, and the Sahelian region of Africa. The policies have been quite successful in some areas: Pakistan built boundary walls around girls' schools and Bangladesh provided sanitary facilities in its schools; however, in some areas, these changes haven't had the affect governments had hoped. For example, in Pakistan, Koranic schools were seen as being lower quality than public schools. Additionally, some research indicates that more parents would enroll their daughters in school if they were to be taught by a female teacher. Just as Bowman and Anderson found, there is a lack of female teachers because training programs seem to be inappropriate, and attracting them to rural areas where teachers are most needed is a problem. Bellew and King described programs initiated to train female teachers in which group residences for several female teachers were built, but cultural attitudes dictate against single women living alone (without a father, brother,

or other close male relative). Other countries tried to attract rural girls to become teachers, hoping that they'd return to their rural home town to teach, but training facilities were located far away, in urban areas and it was often too expensive to either travel long distances to attend or move closer. Pakistan successfully implemented a program in which teacher training was conducted in a unit attached to a secondary school. That program trained 67% of all new female teachers in 1985. Locating the training facilities in such a way reduced the costs and parental opposition, and was considered quite successful.

Reducing both the direct and opportunity costs are important factors in improving female enrolment and education. Lowering the costs of uniforms and books, as well as providing scholarships seems to improve enrolment, although free uniform programs have had mixed results in Bangladesh and it remains to be seen how abolishing mandatory uniforms in Pakistan will improve female enrolment. Recently implemented scholarship programs for girls in Guatemala and Bangladesh have had some positive impacts, but little is known about the effects of other newly implemented programs, such as those sponsored by the governments of India and Nepal. Reducing indirect costs of sending girls to school include establishing day-care centers, improving home technologies to speed up chores, adopting more flexible school schedules, and alternatives to formal schooling. China and Columbia were successful with their day-care centers, but Nepal was unsuccessful in increasing girls' enrolment in schools by providing labor-saving technologies which merely allowed more time for other chores, instead. Mixed results seem to come out of flexible school schedules such as "night





classes,” but both the Indian and Bangladeshi governments found great success with their informal education programs.

Bellew and King conclude the article with some recommendations drawn from their research findings. Governmental policies should be appropriate and affordable, making sure assistance and funding go to those who need it most and that the programs won't drain government resources. Also, understanding the nature of the gender gap in education and which programs are working best to close it requires proper monitoring and evaluation. Often, NGOs, donor agencies, and community groups will be most effective at reliably collecting and analyzing data. Finally, broad policies are important. The authors suggest that programs focusing solely on girls and women may not be as valuable in closing the gender gap as appropriate, properly funded and maintained gender neutral programs. Research indicates government support of primary education benefits girls more than boys because girls are more likely to quit than boys, and improving the quality of rural schools will benefit girls more than boys because girls are less likely to attend better schools, far from home.

Case studies can be helpful in identifying specific issues confronting societies trying to deal with measuring, implementing, and assessing women's education. One study looked at both women and men's perceived expectations for success in university education and job attainment in Malaysia, and another assessed the benefit of programs focusing specifically on women's education in Thailand.

Bee-Lan Chan Wang conducted a study in 1982, *Sex and Ethnic Differences in Educational Investment in Malaysia: the Effect of Reward Structure*, looking at the differences in expectations of educational and job attainment after high school between

sexes and different ethnicities in Malaysia. The population of Malaysia was composed of approximately 55% ethnic Malay, 35% ethnic Chinese, and 9% ethnic Indian. The Chinese and Indians tended to be primarily urban dwellers, and fall into higher socioeconomic groups, while the Malays are generally rural agriculturalists and are the poorest ethnicity in the country. After Malaysian independence, the British handed over government control to the Malays, and policies were instituted to erase the identification of ethnicity with a particular economic function. Wang's study looked at the educational preferential policies favoring Malays over the Chinese or Indians to see if they had an effect on perceptions of job opportunities or higher educational enrolment between men and women as well as between the various ethnic groups. Her findings indicated that there were greater differences in perceptions and aspirations between ethnic lines than gender lines, although women, in general, expected to have less success in obtaining a job or being admitted to a post-secondary institution, and lower pay expectancies than men.

In the article *Post-Cairo Population Policy: Does Promoting Girls' Schooling Miss the Mark?*, published in 1996 in response to the document produced by the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, authors John Knodel and Gavin W. Jones address the prominent place women's education received on the agenda for world population policy. They acknowledge the importance of educating women in increasing societal well-being, but suggest that from the stand-point of social justice, there should be increased awareness of and programs instituted to close the socioeconomic gap in education before the gender gap. Their reasoning includes statistics that indicate that the gender gap in education has been substantially narrowed if not

closed or reversed in some developing countries and situations in most other developing nations are improving, yearly. Also, Knodel and Jones indicate that, in places where there is a wider gender gap, the socioeconomic gap is far wider and more pressing as an issue in educational attainment. Finally, in some places where fertility is still quite high, the gender gap has already been narrowed or closed. Their case studies of Vietnam and Thailand indicate that in socialist as well as non-socialist nations the socioeconomic gap is starker than the gender gap, due to reinforcement by government subsidies of the already better-off portions of the population. Knodel and Jones do not suggest that current programs to improve women's education should be abandoned, but they suggest that educating girls should not come at the price of denying opportunities for boys in the same low-socioeconomic classes.

The preceding research is indicative of the trend of women's education over the last three decades; it demonstrates that women's education has significant benefits for women, their children, and their societies and that educational gender equality should continue to be pursued. While the wide range of research discussed in this literature review has revealed some general trends in the developing world, case studies are necessary to elucidate specific issues concerning women's education in particular regions or countries. The literature provided a basis for the belief that women's education is important and beneficial, and the following study is a more detailed discussion of women's literacy in Malaysia and Thailand. It is hoped that government officials, education experts, and anyone who is interested in closing the gender gap in education will be able to utilize such studies to create better programs and improve policies aimed at the education of women.

## **Gross Domestic Product and Literacy Rates**

Between 1970 and 1997, GDP increased at an average annual rate of 7.5% in Malaysia. Literacy rates for women increased from about 50% in 1970 to about 81% in 1997, a total increase of about 31%; male literacy rates increased by 18% total, from 72% to 90% in 1997. This data indicates that, while female literacy rates were still significantly lower than male literacy rates, they did increase faster during that period of rapid economic growth. Thailand saw an average annual growth rate of 7.7% and has overall higher literacy rates for both men and women (in 1970 and 1997): female literacy rates increased from 75% to 92%, a total increase of 17%, and male literacy rates increased a total of 6%, from 89% to 95%. In terms of change, Malaysia saw greater increases in literacy, and Malaysian women's literacy rates increased more than the literacy rate of any other group.

## **Malaysia**

### **History of the Education System**

Malaysia represents an interesting case study in that the country is home to three different ethnic groups: ethnic Malays or *Bumiputras* (children of the soil, citizens, or natives) (Freedman 2001) make up about 60% of the population, about 25% of Malaysians are ethnic Chinese, and 10% are ethnic Indians (Pong 1993, 1999; CIA World Factbook). It is important to note that Malays run the government although they are historically the most economically disadvantaged ethnic group and live primarily in rural areas. The Chinese and the Indians, on the other hand, tend to live in urban areas and are economically more successful (Pong 1993, 1999). This distinction often

complicates statistics, and generalizations about Malaysians may not hold true at the ethnic level. Throughout this analysis, ethnic differences will be clarified when necessary.

In colonial Malaysia, Malay girls were the least educated (Pong 1999). The British provided primary education to the rural, agriculturally oriented Malays in the Malay language, including instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, lessons in practical work in agriculture, and in cleanliness and punctuality (Hirschman 1979). Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, boys attended Koranic schools, but there were no formal schools for girls (Pong 1999). When the first girls' schools were established in 1883 and 1884, few Malay girls benefited as they were primarily located in urban areas where few Malays resided. In addition, missionaries in Malaysia opened girls' schools with instruction in English, but Malay parents were often skeptical of Christian educations and did not frequently send their daughters to the mission schools. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Malay girls began to be educated more frequently and almost without exception, became teachers. These female teachers tended to be the driving force in promoting female education in Malaysia until independence (Pong 1999).

Formal education for Chinese and Indian girls proceeded slowly, as well. Chinese parents often had very traditional views about a woman's place; education was often seen as unnecessary for girls and the expenses seemed greater than the benefits (Pong 1993). The gender gap in education for Chinese children remained wide, well into the post-independence era (Pong 1999). Likewise, ethnic Indian girls received very poor educations if any at all. Few Indian girls attended Tamil language schools, provided by British plantation owners, in the colonial period (Hirschman 1979, Pong 1993), and those

who did were more likely than boys to drop out (Pong 1999). However, both Chinese and Indian children were more likely to learn in English, due to their mostly urban locale; they were in a better position to climb social and economic ladders as English was the medium of European commerce and trade (Hirschman 1979, Pong 1993). This is the most likely reason for their higher socio-economic status today.

### **Government Education Policies**

The gender gap in education in Malaysia remained wide throughout the colonial period but began to narrow after independence when ethnic Malays inherited control of the government from the British (Pong 1993). Preferential policies in education and other areas were implemented to favor Malays. The National Education Policy of 1961 and the New Economic Policy of 1971 were implemented to restructure the education system into a more unified coherent whole. *Bahasa Malaysia* became the national language as well as the medium of instruction (along with English) in all state sponsored secondary schools and higher education institutions. Additionally, a common curriculum with Malaysian content was mandated for all schools. The National Education Policy was not specifically preferential toward the Malay population although it did benefit Malay children most in that it mandated the construction of more schools in the less educated rural areas where Malays lived, so they were in a position to benefit most (Hirschman 1979). The two goals of the New Economic Policy were to “eradicate poverty and to restructure Malaysian society in such a way that ethnic origin is not identified with economic function and geographic location.” Although this policy was primarily aimed at elimination of ethnic differences, girls, as the most educationally disadvantaged had the most to gain because

they had the least access to and the lowest levels of education to begin with (Pong 1999). Recent studies have shown that the educational gender gap among Malays had all but disappeared in the 1980s; however the gender gaps in education among the Chinese and the Indians were still significant (Wang 1982). The Malaysian government launched the National Policy for Women in 1989 which was reaffirmed by the Sixth and Seventh Malaysia Plans (1991-1995 and 1996-2000) saying, “...the Government also recognizes that specific strategies must necessarily be formulated to effectively incorporate women in the process of development. Towards this end, concerted efforts will be made to progressively reduce existing constraints and facilitate the assimilation of women into the mainstream social and economic activity.” (Sixth Malaysia Plan) (WAO 2001). There have also been government programs of adult education initiated to incorporate functional literacy curricula into socio-economic programs for rural populations to address some educational needs of rural women. These programs include work oriented classes for women for occupations traditionally reserved for men (Fact Sheet 2005). Proponents of women’s equality in Malaysia tend to doubt the government’s commitment, however, citing the lack of protection women have under the law and gender discrimination within the labor force as major obstacles to the achievement of stated goals (WAO 2001).

### **Region**

Research indicates that “women living in cities are more likely to be educated, part of the modern sector of the economy, and more exposed to attitudes and lifestyles that favor smaller families” (Stromquist 1998). Rural areas tend to be associated with



lower income (rural residents are often agriculturally oriented (Pong 1999)), less developed infrastructure, and decreased ability to send children to school. Costs associated with educating children include fees, books, and clothes, as well as a loss of time for chores at home, caring for younger siblings, and forgone wages for the children who do not work at home (World Bank 1991). Additionally, in places where schools are few and far away, many spaces in those schools have, in the past been reserved for boys (World Bank 1991), although this situation has changed considerably since Malaysian independence (UNICEF 2005). Some of the steps Malaysia has taken to improve girls' enrolment in primary education include abolishing school fees, introducing a school health program, supplementary food and milk schemes (plans), and the introduction of a textbook-on-loan scheme (UNICEF 2005). The Progress of Children Report, published by UNICEF in 2005, suggested that one notable challenge Malaysia faces is educating children in remote and sparsely populated areas such as Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. These states have high concentrations of low-income groups and children often need to work to supplement family income.

## **Religion**

Islam in Malaysia is far more moderate than the Islam of the Middle East or South Asia. Women have enjoyed more freedoms, their public contributions have been affirmed by cultural traditions, they have never needed permission from men to travel abroad, and there has been no tradition of a segregated living space (Newsbreak 2004). After colonial independence, girls were able to enjoy relatively equal access to primary and secondary education; recently, girls have begun to outperform boys in school, and they generally

have lower dropout rates (Edu. For All 2001, Newsbreak 2004). Many Muslim women, especially the Sisters in Islam, a moderate, nongovernmental organization aimed at promoting equality, justice, and freedom for women within the framework of Islam, are working to promote women's rights, equality, and to improve the lives of women in Malaysia (SIS 2007). Yet many Malaysians are worried about the recent Islamic resurgence in the country, alarming moderates and threatening tradition. One author feels as though "women are being taught that they are inferior to men" despite that the Koran gives equal value to both women and men before God, and non-Muslims worry that their rights will be jeopardized (Newsbreak 2004, PBS 2005). The rise of the conservative fundamentalist Islamic Party (*Parti Islam SeMalaysia* or PAS) which calls for full implementation of *shariah*, or Islamic religious law, has gained support, now controlling 15% of the national vote, and has led the current government to become more "Islamic" itself. For example, it has created a new Islamic university, introduced interest free Islamic banking, and given the *shariah* courts greater autonomy in dealing with family law (PBS 2005).

## **Culture**

Education in primary and secondary schools has improved to near equality for girls and boys; cultural factors seem to have more effect on women's education in vocational and tertiary schools, including university. Female students are enrolled in high numbers in courses such as home economics (92%), principles of accounting (61%), and basic economics (56%), but make up only 33% and 39% of students taking courses such as agricultural science and engineering technology, respectively. Likewise, in technical or

vocational courses female students make up high percentages in home economics and commerce (90% and 80%, respectively) and very low percentages in engineering trades (10%). Government reports show that gender stratification still exists, as seen in a large number of women pursuing home economics subjects or courses as compared to engineering courses. This is attributed to students' interests and cultural socialization but cannot be attributed to discriminatory de facto regulations; this is by choice rather than design, say the government reports (Edu. For All 2001).

Another finding with possible cultural origins is the differences in wages earned by women in different ethnic groups. Malay women earn a wage nearly on par with that of Malay men (\$.95 on the \$1.00) while Chinese women earn much less than Chinese men (\$.58 on the \$1.00). This discrepancy could be due to cultural differences in that patriarchy is more deeply embedded in Chinese culture or that women are afforded fewer family resources to attend school and have fewer qualifications than Chinese men (Pong 1999). However, another plausible explanation has to do with preferential policies. Malay women receive an education equal to that of men and are able to find better jobs in the public sector where earnings are higher and Malays receive job preferences. Women of other ethnicities in Malaysia do not have the qualifications to obtain public sector jobs where as the men in their ethnic group do, so they are relegated to the private sector, where they earn less (Pong 1999).

### **Analysis**

Malaysia has made commendable progress in improvement of education, particularly in increasing literacy rates. The National Policy for Women seemed to be

particularly successful in that it helped to increase female literacy rates by 13% more than male literacy rates increased over the same time period. Literacy rates are nearly on par for the youngest age cohort: 95.85% for males and 95.17% for females, ages 15 to 24 (Edu. For All 2001). Additionally, female participation in education is higher than male participation, and dropout rates for girls are lower than those for boys (Edu. For All 2001, Fact Sheet 2005).

These policies have also managed to increase access to education in rural areas and raise the literacy rates of rural children, but not to the extent seen in the cities. In urban areas, Malays have become the best educated ethnic group and have the best access to university education; girls of all ethnicities stay in school longer than boys. On the other hand, rural families are still some of the poorest in the country and literacy rates have not reached those in urban areas. East Malaysia still requires much government aid and incentive to send children to school as well as more school facilities and improved school quality. Additionally, improvements in education availability in both rural and urban areas will mean little to women who experience gender discrimination in the labor force. All women in Malaysia need to be able to take advantage of their educations via equal job access and opportunity.

Understandably, the Malay controlled government has instituted policies to improve the lives of fellow Malays who lagged economically and educationally behind ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians, but it seems to have allowed this to benefit Malays at the expense of minority ethnicities. The ethnic gap in education has been closed, and gender gaps in literacy have narrowed substantially for Malays since preferential policies were instituted, but ethnic Chinese and Indian women have not seen such pronounced

changes in literacy rates between genders (Wang 1982). The government should take caution with its preferential policies so as not to neglect Chinese or Indian women.

It is unclear what the religious struggle will mean for women in Malaysia. Islam has not been an insurmountable barrier for women's education in the past, but should Malaysia become a full Islamic state, that may change, especially if women are expected to be "submissive, selfless, and obedient" and lose all autonomy (Newsbreak 2004). It could also mean an abrupt halt to the already slowing educational achievement of ethnic minority women in Malaysia. Families of all ethnicities will have few incentives educate their daughters if their destinies include little more than submissiveness and obedience.

Despite equal opportunities in education, cultural norms and attitudes about the proper subjects of study or careers for women have not yet been overcome. This is not unusual as even developed nations are not totally free of gender discrimination. The wage gap in the US is wider than the wage gap among Malays. Pong suggested that preferential policies may result in wage gaps between Chinese men and women; it's not unlikely that traditional Chinese values play a part in wage discrepancy as well. Chinese women earn a lower wage because they have fewer qualifications due to preferential policies, she suggests. Fewer qualifications probably stemmed from less access to equal education because of traditional values. It is unfortunate that equal educational and economic opportunities are not shared in ethnic minorities in Malaysia. As mentioned above, perhaps this is a shortcoming in government policies, or it could be a function of culture. Traditional ideas and values have not evolved enough to allow women to have an equal place in society with the freedom to choose which ever occupation they wish or earn equal pay for equal work.

## **Thailand**

### **History of the Education System**

Thailand, as noted above, had similar trends in economic growth between 1970 and 1997, and only slightly higher literacy rates for both men and women than Malaysia. Unlike Malaysia, Thailand is relatively ethnically homogenous. About 95% of the population are ethnic Thai (or Chinese who have assimilated into Thai culture) who professes Theravada Buddhism as their religion. About 4-5% practice Islam and four fifths of Muslims live in the southern region of Thailand in the provinces bordering Malaysia. Most are ethnic Malay and speak *Bahasa Malaysia* (Knodel et al 1999, PIER 2000).

The history of education for women and girls did not begin until the very late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The education system had slowly been evolving for several centuries, but this included royal institutional instruction for princes and sons of nobles or religious and family instruction in the monastery and at home, but provided little in the way of education for girls (Johnson 1978, Costa 1997, Walsh 2005). Historically, education in Thailand was provided by Buddhist monks in temple compounds called *wats* which were the center of social life in most villages; they operated schools, clinics, community centers, old age homes, and provided other important services for community members. 75% of the population of Thailand is rural and, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, education for peasants was managed by Buddhist monks; formal education was rare and was only available to nobles and royalty at palace compounds (Walsh 2005, Weightman 2006). Women were barred from the monkhood and were thus unable to study at the local *wat*;

thus, their access to education was generally limited to their spheres of life such as home and childbearing, marketplace, rice fields, and support of the *sangha*, or the local order of Buddhist monks. Some sources indicate that elite women did receive formal education in palace compounds but, again, it tended to be restricted to gender specific subjects like culturally appropriate forms of manner and speech, craft making, and how to run a household. Peasant women had virtually no opportunity to learn to read (Costa 1997). Several girls' schools opened between 1897 and 1913, but regular education for girls did not proliferate until 1921 when the Compulsory Primary Education Act was proclaimed in which state sponsored education became compulsory for both genders (Johnson 1978, Costa 1997, UNESCO 1998).

### **Government Education Policies**

Thailand's rural women have seen a decrease in illiteracy rates from 29% to about 7-8% since the 1960s; however, vocational training opportunities are lacking and existing curricula tend not to be relevant to promote women's skill development and participation in rural labor forces. Such emphases on formal over vocational education and centralization reflect some of the deficiencies in the Thai system of education. Both government and non-government providers of non-formal education (NFE) have seen some success. In 1996, 53.5% of participants enrolled in courses offered by the Department of Non-formal Education were women. However, male participation rates were higher in classroom-based teaching programs while more women took courses based on self-instruction, perhaps reflecting greater demands on women's time (ADB 1998). Additionally, non-formal education is seen as less prestigious than formal

education, although it has proven to be a valuable resource for local empowerment; many educators suggest that the government should work to increase the status of NFE by making it more visible and sharing the success stories (UNESCO 1998).

## **Region**

A majority of the Thai population is rural and income is lower in these areas because many are focused primarily on rice production. Only 32% of rural children enter lower secondary schools while 75% of urban children attend lower secondary schools. Similarly, 23% of rural children enroll in upper secondary regardless of whether they entered lower secondary, compared with 61% of urban children (Knodel and Wongsith 1991). One area of particular concern for the Thai government is the southern region, especially the provinces sharing the border with Malaysia. A large number of ethnic Malays live in this area, and in several provinces, they make up the majority population. Although some Malays in the south speak Thai, most speak *Bahasa Malaysia*. The literacy rate is considerably lower in this region; 93.2% literacy in the south compared with 96.4% in the entire kingdom and 96.7% in the central region, including Bangkok (UNICEF 2006). Ethnic conflicts between Thais and ethnic Malays in the southern region, arising out of socio-economic concerns, have made improvement of education facilities difficult. For example, separatist militants burned down 11 schools in one day in apparent retaliation for the murder of Abdulraman Sama, a respected Muslim religious teacher. “The insurgents are terrorizing teachers and schools, which they consider symbols of the Thai state” (Human Rights Watch 2007). The Thai government has made a commitment to assist *pondoks*, schools operated by Islamic teachers, including



upgrading physical facilities, developing special programs for non-Thai speaking children, non-formal education programs for the poor, and measures to enhance higher education in the south (UNICEF no date). Also, Malaysia has offered to provide vocational training for youths from southern Thailand as well as provide scholarships and help to incorporate religious studies into school curricula (CNET 2007). Girls in southern Thailand have higher enrolment rates than boys (66% and 59% respectively); as children grow older, religious school is increasingly important, more so for girls than boys. Several explanations include the perception that post-secondary education opportunities are not as available to Muslim girls as boys in the south, cultural preferences for religious instruction before women take on the responsibilities of wives and mothers, and it's likely that a more educated woman is a better bride-prospect. However, observers note that women seem to feel less empowered than men, and even a well educated woman perceives limitations on her decision making capacity (UNICEF no date).

## **Religion**

Education is secular in modern Thailand, but government policy will “support and promote religion-affiliated educational institutions in promoting religious teachings and doctrines... [and] encourage children and youth to study religious teachings (Royal Thai Embassy 2007).” Buddhism presupposes the spiritual equality of all beings, but in the earthly realm of a patriarchal society such as Thailand, women are not afforded such equality (Dewaraja 1981). One is reborn a woman due to negative karma in a past life so the subordination of women is given religious justification. One source suggested that monks cannot touch or be touched by a woman, or accept anything from a woman's

hand, but this has not been substantiated by any resource of authority (Asiatours, no date). Buddhist dogma does not reject the education of women, but it does suggest that being a woman is of less value than being a man (a step down on the reincarnation ladder). It is difficult to assess the impacts of Buddhism, either positive or negative, on the lives of women. It is seen more as a way of life than a religion so it is difficult to separate its effects from those of culture or government policy (Dewaraja 1981).

### **Culture**

Like Malaysian women, Thai women have faced several cultural obstacles along the path to equality. Women's literacy rates have improved tremendously, but women face discrimination in many aspects of their lives. Past sex discrimination can be seen in the literacy rates of older age groups. In a 1990 census, six out of ten illiterate people in Thailand were older women from poor families which sent sons to school and kept daughters home to work. Today, the opportunity cost of educating girls is higher than that for boys because of the demand for females in the labor industry; in 1998, women represented 44% of the labor force and 85% of workers in export industries (ADB 1998).

Girls tend to study subjects deemed appropriate for their sex: home economics, commerce, business administration, nursing, and teaching. Some institutions of higher education use quotas determined by sex. Disciplines like veterinary sciences, agricultural economics, and economics of cooperatives, industrial agriculture, marine sciences, archeology, marketing, and production management specify a higher proportion of male students. The only discipline with a higher quota for women is nursing. An explanation for these quotas relates to market demands, the demand for women veterinarians, is said



to be very limited. It is also argued that women benefit less from technological upgrades. They tend to be the first to be replaced and are believed to have less technical knowledge than men so they'll be more difficult to train. There has even been some criticism that providers of non-formal education to women emphasize "feminine" pursuits such as hairdressing, dress making, food preparation, and handicrafts (ADB 1998).

### **Analysis**

It has been said that education is second only to Buddhism in Thailand (Johnson 1978, PIER 2000). Although literacy rates are quite high for a developing nation and women's literacy is reaching parity with men's literacy, critics argue that there is still much work to be done. It is apparent that the Thai government sees the importance of taking steps to improve the lives of women through various formal and non-formal education policies and programs of many women have already taken advantage, but it seems as though they have not implemented most appropriate kinds of programs to benefit the women they're intended to help. Rural women unable to utilize the skills they've learned through special education policies are little better off than those who haven't received training. Additionally, attitudes toward the value of education must be changed to promote further participation in programs that have been successful in the past. In the south, girls tend to be better educated than boys, but have little ability to use their education to improve their lives. Muslim women in the rural south have few career prospects and look forward to little more than marriage after school.

Buddhism may not be an obvious obstacle to women's education, but it upholds patriarchy and female subordination. It is so deeply embedded in the culture of Thais that these issues will take much time and effort to overcome.

Like Malaysia, Thailand faces huge obstacles in cultural attitudes toward women. One UNESCO report stated that "...issues...in girls' and women's advancement in education and careers to be effective and resourceful citizens have not been seriously looked into partly because of the pride and prejudice among Thai authorities and members of society who resist taking gender into account (UNESCO 1998)." Also, women's conferences on education reform have mostly been overlooked in Thailand, suggesting that perhaps boys and girls parity or near parity enrollment and literacy rates, being very visible and obvious indicators of equality, are enough to satisfy those worried about gender discrimination (UNESCO 1998). This signals only superficial improvement in women's lives. For example, a high demand for engineers in Thailand results in better-paying jobs for engineers and a higher status in society. Women working in their appropriately "feminine" careers such as hairdressing and handicrafts will not see such benefits.

## **Conclusion**

Looking more closely at the factors that affect women's education in Malaysia and Thailand gives one a better idea of the obstacles which have been overcome in the last three decades as well as those still requiring attention. With economic growth in both countries have come increased literacy rates, especially for women. There is little doubt that both countries will close their literacy gaps completely within the next decade and

women will continue to see increased opportunities. Yet there is still work to be done; regional gaps in literacy are still quite wide and differences in educational attainment levels between ethnic groups need to be dealt with, as well. Recently, there has been a call for more attention paid to the deficient educational achievement and literacy rates of children from low socio-economic status families as Knodel's article demonstrates; this is an emerging trend that won't be ignored by policy makers. Some issues such as population growth, high infant mortality, sexually transmitted diseases, and even poverty will be diminished in scale along the way, merely by educating women. The hope is that with further investigation into existing gender disparities, their causes, and their solutions, as exemplified by this paper, developing countries will dramatically improve the lives of their women in a lasting way and will be able to move on to other pressing problems.

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