

Women's Struggle for Housing Rights in Thailand

BY SOMPORN SURARITH

We have many problems concerning women and shelter in Thailand, problems of immense worry. There are a large number of slums, and unfortunately, a rapidly increasing number of slums in Bangkok whose tenants are being forcibly evicted. Our federal and municipal governments constantly turn a blind eye to this problem, a problem which is ruining our city and creating terrible havoc among our sisters and brothers living in the slums. Naturally it is the women who suffer the most, along with their children, whose lives are uprooted, and communities and financial networks destroyed.

This is the story of our struggle to save the Rama IV slum in Bangkok.

In those early days of fighting against the eviction — those difficult, tear-filled days — it was often as painful as childbirth. Every time we wanted to march, we had to pull the men by their ears to make them come join us. When we had to call emergency meetings late at night to plan our next actions, it was usually we women who attended. The men generally did not come. Sometimes they would come, but in small numbers.

Our women went to jail, not our men! Perhaps it was better that way in the long run. I do not know.

I always remember Mrs. Somsri. She has seven children, and her husband had abandoned her. Every day she had to sell fish in the market to provide for her family. Still, every time we had a meeting or an action, she was there, willing to help. Without Somsri, I do not think I could have fought all those years. Later they came to make a Thai movie about Somsri's life.

She often said to me during those days, "Somporn, it is we the women who must fight this evil eviction. We must fight for our children. We must give them a better life."

Women and Housing

Now we should look briefly at the role women play in the urban slums, how they feel about their homes in the slums, and how they are involved in seeking solutions.

I am not a trained academic on housing and urban affairs. However, I have become involved in the fight for housing rights for the poor to a large extent because I am

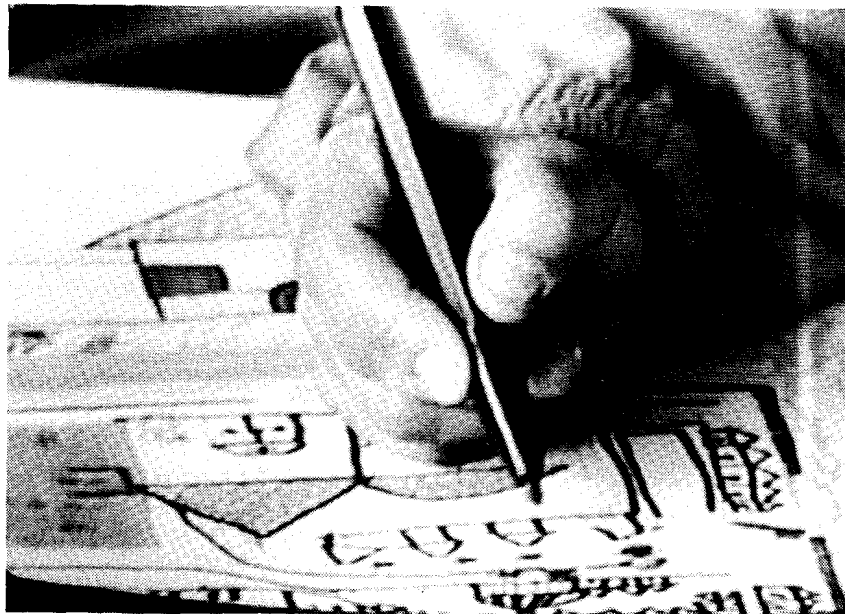
a woman and know the attachment we women have to the home — how important it is to us to have a secure place for our children. I believe that women feel this much more strongly than men as we women spend more of our time in the home and with our children. Our house is not simply a place where we go to sleep at night, but it represents our home, which means everything to our lives. Our lives revolve around our home. In the mornings our first responsibility is food, and we know immediately where the food our children like is available, how much it costs and how to get it quickly and cleanly. We know where the school for our children is and we can take them there easily and safely. If our children are not well, we know where the clinics and doctors are and which ones will give us the best help for the small amount of money we can afford to pay. All of this is destroyed if we are suddenly evicted. Our lives are turned totally upside-down and we must start completely over again. This is a terrible task for us as we have so many other things to be responsible for. That is why we feel so strongly about protecting our home, and why we are so often much more deeply involved in the fight against eviction than the men in our community.

Another reason why women get more involved in the fight for housing rights may be because of our nature. We are more gentle and patient (but not weak) and this helps in negotiations. Men are often more hot-blooded and will walk out of negotiations if they feel they are losing face. We are more stubborn and will stick with it longer for the sake of our children.

We often have an advantage that we can say things more directly and the opposition will listen. If a man stands up in a meeting and charges government officials with corruption, it is very possible that he will be killed sometime later. A woman can

say the same things and the opposition will feel less comfortable about shouting back or taking violent actions against us.

From our experience in the Rama IV community when the capitalists began trying to steal our land rights, we found that the nightly meetings to plan strategy were attended largely by housewives who felt their homes were being threatened. At these meetings we planned which power



Women planning communities. This project creating women's housing networks was organized by Fedevivienda in Bogota, Colombia and supported by Rooftops Canada, the co-op housing liaison to Third World countries.

groups we should lobby and what strategy we should use with each one. Then we went home to discuss these plans with the men to make them feel that they were to ones making the decisions and were leading the community fight.

As far as we know, there have been no other communities such as ours in Bangkok which have faced this kind of eviction. We were not a squatter community. We were a legal and economically stable community until the land grabbers tried to cheat us out of our homes. We did not have any previous examples to learn from in our planning for the struggle. We had to learn from doing, and from unifying our ideas. We knew that we lacked experience, so we also contacted friends who had knowledge in specific areas whom we thought could help us. Strangely enough, most of these professional supporters were women (about 90 per cent). They were social workers, journalists, activists, human rights workers, government workers and students. When our housewives group met we invited these friends to join us to share their knowledge and ideas with us. From these discussions, we decided that we should not simply demand our housing rights, but that we should also begin to develop the life of the community people. Perhaps this concept came from our experience as mothers.

When we held demonstrations at the various government ministries, students helped in preparing street dramas and writing posters. Almost all of these student activists were women.

We started our community development by organizing a credit union and savings program. These savings could be used to upgrade our homes if we were successful in our struggle for housing rights. If we failed, these savings could help us re-establish our lives somewhere else. We found that men and women understood the value of the credit union in different ways. Women generally borrowed money to buy food, or to purchase a small cart they could use to sell food in the market. Sometimes they borrowed the money for home-improvements, etc. Men, on the other hand, generally wanted money to buy alcohol and cigarettes.

Secondly we organized a day care centre so that the small children of working mothers could have a healthy environment to live in with proper food as well as

a place to begin their education.

We also organized a "Disaster Relief Volunteer" unit to help provide protection against fire, both in our community as well as in surrounding communities.

Occupational training was organized for housewives so that they could increase their meager incomes.

We contacted the University Bureau of Bangkok to help provide a mobile clinic so that health problems in the community could be solved.

A legal aid office was established in the community to help provide legal advice to the people. This was set up to help the people deal with their daily legal problems as well as the eviction issue.

We tried to coordinate with various governmental agencies to get services in upgrading our community. Through this effort we improved walkways and brought in water, etc.

We also suggested plans for a land-sharing scheme with the company in which we would take full responsibility for building our own homes and infrastructure. The government never gave their okay to this plan even though other communities since then have borrowed our idea and have got government permission to carry out a land-sharing program.

It would be unfair to suggest that men have had no part in our struggle. Men have also provided much encouragement and help. My husband, for example, is an engineer and although he has not been much interested in the struggle of the people, he has helped us in planning the re-construction of the community. Since the area is swampy land, it is important to know what kind of pilings are needed, how deep they should be, etc. He has provided us with his expert advice.

Solutions

The slums in Bangkok are mostly made up of people who were born here. Thus this problem must be solved here in the urban areas rather than in the rural areas.

The most important point is that the government must accept the fact that the slum communities exist, and that the slum people provide the city with extremely important services. Therefore the government should share some of the benefits of the city with the poor. For example:

1. Evictions should be totally ended.

2. The government should give the poor a chance to be involved in the planning for solutions to their own problems, rather than top-down programs for the government which rarely prove to be successful.
3. The government should encourage the establishment of community-based organizations which would work at solving their problems, and developing the quality of the life of the people with support and encouragement from government officials.
4. The government should make every effort to provide housing security to the poor by guaranteeing that the people will not be evicted. This could be done by giving long-term leases to the people, land ownership, etc. This would give the people the confidence they need to invest their money in upgrading their houses and the area around their homes.
5. The government must work together with the people to provide services such as water, electricity, drainage, roads, footpaths, schools and clinics, which are essential parts of any human community. (These things are generally not provided, forcing the poor to live in non-human conditions.)

Conclusions

Presently, the Rama IV community has most of the services which make up a human community. We have roads, footpaths, water, electricity, a school. However, we lack one of the most essential ingredients for our happy and peaceful existence — the right to our homes. The attempt by the capitalists to evict us continues! Therefore, we must keep up our struggle and our demands.

We still demand that the Royal Crown Properties and the government force the company to implement its agreement with the people by building the flats and other infrastructure that the people require.

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