

# Thai Women in Agriculture

by Phanna Waikakul

*Cet article met en relief le rôle que les Thaïlandaises jouent dans l'agriculture, plus particulièrement sur les changements qu'elles ont apporté dans la production agricole, dans les soins de leurs familles et dans la protection de l'environnement et des ressources naturelles.*

In the past, rural women were perceived merely as housewives. Recently, however, women's increasing role in agriculture production has indicated that they have great potential to be agents for change if they are given proper training. Out of the 12.7 million women in the work force in Thailand, 67 per cent are engaged in agricultural production. Currently, there are about 20 million farm workers in Thailand of whom 47 per cent are women. These women are involved in all steps of agriculture from planting to harvesting. There are three main groups of women farm workers: unpaid family workers (80 per cent), employers (daughters of land-owning families who have inherited land), and employees of the Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Extension, or of private employers.

Women's working hours in the field are longer than men's; most

work over 50 hours per week. In spite of this, women are also responsible for household chores as well as looking after children and other family members. Their spare time is occupied by other income generating activities such as cotton or silk weaving,



mat weaving, and other handicrafts.

Farm women have some influence in the decision-making process in agriculture. Husbands usually consult their wives about the type of crops they should grow. Thai women are also the "family bankers," in charge of the family income and making decisions on domestic matters, such as food, clothing, etc. Men usually look after buying farm equipment.

Currently, however, many men have moved out of agricultural work to seek better economic opportunities. As such, women have had to assume all the responsibilities on the farm. They have thus been trained in the use of technology to increase food production, such as using fertilizers and chemical pesticides, applying biotechnology in plant development, and operating farm machinery.

*Before my husband always did all pest controls. Since he has to work somewhere else, I have learned that if I want to spray insecticide I have to close my nose and mouth, wear long sleeves and spray them above the wind. I must not throw insecticide*

*bottles or cans on the ground but put them away in proper places so I will not pollute the water and the soil. (Pranee Okka, women's group leader from Ban Nong Ngong)*

Since farming in Thailand has become increasingly difficult for economic reasons, and

debts are accumulated by the increasing cost of farm supplies as well as natural disasters such as floods or droughts, farm women need access to some financial assistance. The majority of women borrow money from their relatives and friends. Some are loaned money or are credited for materials they need (seed, fertilizers, insecticides, etc.) by middlemen. After harvesting they repay their loan with their products.

Others obtain money from the "revolving fund." Although there is no law inhibiting women's access to credit from banks or cooperatives, traditionally it was the men's responsibility to contact bankers or pertinent officials. Developmental projects have, however, been providing women with training on technology, management, and leadership. These

projects also receive and manage funds from which members can borrow at a very low interest rates.

*After we were trained from the Women's Economic and Leadership Development Program (WELD), 20 of us set up a saving group plus some seed money from the project. At that time we had 20,000 Baht to start with. Now we have 90 members and more than 200,000 Baht for our group to borrow*

*with a very low interest. (Kalaya Boonsri, savings group leader from Hang Churt, Lampang)*

As well as training in farm technologies, in the past two or three years there have been an increasing number of women trained in agricultural management and marketing. Government and non-governmental organizations are helping women farmers get this training.

Pranee Okka, for example, the leader of a women's agricultural group in Khon Kaen has been trained in leadership, book keeping, accounting, and management skills. By working in a group these women no longer need to rely on middlemen for their income. She and the members of her group mass produce Chinese radish for consumption in

many regions and are earning good profits from their efforts. Working in the groups has also helped women develop greater confidence in themselves.

*After I spent five days in the train-*



*ing of self-development course of the weld project conducted by the Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement Foundation, I went home with more self-confidence. I decided to run for the next village head election. Now besides looking after my weaving group I am also a village head. (Yupin Inumporn)*

Along with technology training women farmers are also advised on environmental concerns, such as the conservation of soil and water. They are urged to use natural dyes for their silks or cotton weaving products. They are also encouraged to form natural resource management groups and act as natural resource protectors. This role is vital for sustainable development in the future.

Women always make concerted efforts to bring new ideas to the villages and to try them out. They visit other women's groups and learn from them. Sharing experiences and teaching each other are common practices among women's groups in the same

line of production. A network of women farmer's groups is facilitated by the Department of Community Development and Agriculture Extension. Through this network women farmers can exchange their farm supplies, raw materials, share information and technology,

and form an alternative agricultural market.

Women remain on their farms to maintain their families and community ties, and to retain ownership of the land. They become heads of the household, take care of the manual labour, and work with the machinery. The increasing number of female-headed households in agriculture has given women greater access to society through borrowing money, contacting banks, attending meetings, and participating in technical training programs. Women's increasing responsibility for agricultural production in Thailand has made them effective catalysts for change.

*Dr. Phanna Waikakul is a lecturer at Faculty of Agriculture, Khon Kaen University in Khon Kaen, Thailand.*