

# A Farewell to Farms

## Thai Women Enter an Industrial Society

by Pawadee Tonguthai

*L'auteure examine les changements qui s'opèrent dans la vie des Thaïlandaises de milieux ruraux qui travaillent en manufactures afin d'augmenter le revenu familial. Pour de plus en plus de Thaïlandaises, le travail en manufacture devient un style de vie permanent et la sécurité au travail, la sécurité d'emploi et les services de garde des enfants deviennent des points cruciaux dans leur lutte pour l'équité et le droit au travail.*

At a recent hearing of the Parliamentary Committee on Justice and Human Rights, held in late 1994, women workers testified about the injustice and violation of their labour rights taking place in factories in Thailand.

When Pilaiwan left her village in Northeastern Thailand almost three years ago at the age of 18, she was fulfilling both her own dream and her duty as a daughter. For as long as she could remember, rural women had been migrating to factory jobs in Bangkok—a much preferred alternative to working without pay on the family farm or waiting for occasional non-farm jobs. The women migrants' successes were measured by how much money they sent back home, and how big their parents' houses became as a result.

Pilaiwan got a job right away at a textile factory in an industrial area on the outskirts of Bangkok. She was contented for a while until a friend in a nearby factory told her that her pay was less than the legal minimum wage. Together with about 80 workers, she

went to ask the employer for their rights. When he refused, she took him to labour court. By that time most of the workers had decided to drop the case rather than risk losing their jobs. But Pilaiwan was determined to go ahead.



Vanphen at work

And she won. The victory gave her enough confidence to take the significant step of starting a factory labour union with herself as secretary of the committee. This time her employer reacted with open hostility, using all forms of harassment to push her out. When she persisted, he asked for the labour court's permission to dismiss her on grounds of disobedience and neglect of duty. After a number of trips to court, and with no money for a lawyer, Pilaiwan became discouraged, simply accepted the \$us 200 wages owed to her, and left the firm for another job.

After ten months of cleaning dust from machines in a textile factory, 22-year-old Karaket became seriously ill. The doctor told her that her lung was so badly damaged that it could function at only 30 per cent of its original capacity. Two years went by before it was ruled that the cause of

her suffering was workplace hazards. She finally received \$us 4,000 compensation but her health has deteriorated so much that she cannot do any more factory work for at least another five years.

Mayuree was among a group of workers in the Northern Industrial Estate who came down with a mysterious disease; 14 of them later died. Doctors at the hospital reported finding abnormal levels of aluminum in their blood. The Public Health Ministry's investigation, however, concluded that the workers could have been infected with the aids virus and therefore absolved factory owners of any responsibility.

Metta had a miscarriage in the second month of her pregnancy after being made to carry machines weighing more than 50 kilograms down several flights of stairs. Two young women workers in electronics factory were dismissed after they insisted on being treated by a particular doctor who was a leading specialist in occupational disease. The specialist had diagnosed their illness as lead poisoning. The firm's doctor, on the other hand, said the nausea and numbness in their fingertips would soon go away.

There are also cases of workers who were fired after being absent from work due to illness or those who were asked to resign only to find out that their resignation rendered them ineligible for workers' compensation.

Public awareness of the details of various hazards to workers' health and safety has increased in recent years. The incident that shocked eve-

rybody into sudden awareness of the dangers facing factory workers was the May 1993 fire at the Kader Doll Factory near Bangkok. A cigarette butt left by a male worker started the world's worst factory fire. One hundred and eighty-eight workers, 174 of them young women, burned to death, suffocated, or died from injuries suffered as a result of jumping off the buildings. Almost 500 more were injured, permanently disfigured, or disabled.

Saiyud came to work at Kader because her mother needed income to pay off a debt. Income from their small farm was no longer enough to feed the whole family. She told how the fire spread very quickly. The poorly built buildings started to collapse in less than 15 minutes. Saiyud jumped from the third floor and broke her back. After recovering from the fall, she faced another shock, "Nobody wants to hire me, they think I will bring them bad luck or remind other workers of the fire and demand more safety measures from the firm."

### **Women unionists: catalysts of change**

Among the audience at that recent Parliamentary hearing were two well known women union leaders, Arunee and Vanphen, who are working together on what they feel to be the three most urgent issues for women workers: safety, job security, and facilities at work.

A Committee for Workers' Health and Safety was set up after the Kader tragedy. One of the first requests to the government was to declare May 10th National Safety Day in memory of the 188 victims of the fire. The main emphasis of the committee is to

inform workers about hazards in the work environment, and to educate them about preventing hazards as well as convincing employers that it is in their best interest to provide a safer workplace. Workers are also trained to make full use of the basic safety measures provided by the firm, such as masks or gloves, even though wearing them may cause some inconvenience.

Many factories have been reducing



*Arunee in 1993 at a factory gate during the protest*

the retirement age for women to 55 years or even 45 while keeping it at 60 for men. Market competition and the introduction of new technology have caused downsizing, and women, especially older ones, are always the first to go. Arunee experienced this problem herself when the company she was with for more than 20 years decided to close down one section, and in the process laid off 376 workers—including Arunee and five other union leaders. The firm then proceeded to recruit new workers, all in their late teens or early twenties. These new workers were paid starting wages considerably less than the laid off workers who were, on average, over forty years old. Arunee says, "I felt like I was being treated no better than a piece of machine's part, to be thrown away when old and rusty, easily replaced with brand new ones."

Increasing the period of paid ma-

ternity leave from 30 to 90 days was a major achievement for Arunee and Vanphen in 1992. Vanphen was several months' pregnant with her first child when she took part in the demonstration in front of the government house. She was also part of the first group of women who were eligible for the benefit.

Women unionists are getting more practical and community oriented—a shift from the time when their demands centered around wages. "The public gets irritated and blames us for the increased cost of living," says Vanphen. "Although it's not our fault that the vendors take the opportunity to raise their prices we get the blame anyway. When we ask for things like maternity leave or safety in the workplace, we get a lot of support."

Their approach towards child care facilities indicates this new trend. Al-

though the government has a policy for employers to provide such facilities in the workplace, women represent a small proportion of workers in many firms. Insisting on such facilities may cause employers to be less willing to hire women. Instead, they are asking for a centre to be shared by several firms as well as the nearby community.

There are not many women workers like Arunee and Vanphen. The overall union membership in Thailand is less than five per cent of the total industrial workers. Women represent an insignificant proportion of union leaders. The obvious constraint for married women in joining union activities are family responsibilities. After their eight-hour days, more work awaits them at home. Single workers have different obligations. "They are often under pressure to earn as much and as quickly as they can, not to

satisfy their own needs but because they have to support their parents, sisters and brothers—who seem to be constantly in urgent need of cash.” After a couple of hours of overtime work, the women do not even want to think of union activities.

When young women from the villages were simply circulating between farms and factories, long term issues such as safety, job security, and child-care facilities did not seem pressing. Until recently, women factory workers did not see themselves as an integral part of the industrial world and they remained farm daughters at heart. Factory work may be hard, and working conditions may be unsafe, but when they return to their lives on the farms, those unpleasant memories soon fade away. In the past, they have been able to choose to end the injustice and sufferings by just quitting

their jobs and returning to their farms where their ultimate security lies.

That option is now questionable. In the Northeast, which has long been the country's largest contributor of rural-to-urban migrants, income from farms has dwindled while demand for cash has grown as commercialization affects even the remotest village. Farmers have to rely on income from family members working in the cities or doing other non-agricultural activities. Fertile land is sold and turned into vacation homes or golf courses, while the less fertile land requires increasing efforts to make it profitable. More importantly, the younger generation is no longer interested in farming but is looking to industry as a permanent way of life. Villages are becoming quiet, with only the old, the very young or the disabled left behind.

As women workers realize that they are in the industrial world to stay, that returning to the farms soon will no longer be an option, they will be less tolerant of the violations of their labour rights. Their attitude and their approach to factory work will have to change. They may not win the battle for their rights every time, as the case of Pilaiwan illustrates. But having come this far, Pilaiwan and women like her will soon pick up their courage and continue the work that women like Arunee and Vanphen have started. Together they will bring the needed changes to the labour scene.

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*"In the future, I expect that women will be the leaders in the country. I am quite sure that women will do a good job and we should give them the opportunity."*

*Drawing by Mr. Rabiab Tongsupol, 15 years old, grade 9 student in Thailand.  
First Prize winner in a recent contest about school children's perceptions of "Thai Women in the Future."*