

## Women's Participation in Slum Organisations

*Does it Make a Difference?*

Thorbek, Susanne

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):  
[10.5278/freia.14136492](https://doi.org/10.5278/freia.14136492)

Publication date:  
1996

Document Version  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Thorbek, S. (1996). *Women's Participation in Slum Organisations: Does it Make a Difference?* Department of History, International and Social Studies, Aalborg University. FREIA's tekstserie No. 26  
<https://doi.org/10.5278/freia.14136492>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Susanne Thorbek**

**Women's Participation in Slum  
Organisations -  
Does it Make a Difference?**

**FREIA**

Paper  
August 1995

**26**

*Feminist Research Centre in Aalborg  
Department of Development and Planning  
Aalborg University  
Fibigerstraede 2  
DK-9220 Aalborg Ö.  
Phone: +45 98-158522 Fax: +45 98-153298*

Susanne Thorbek:  
**Women's Participation in Slum Organizations -  
Does it Make a Difference?**

Paper from  
FREIA - Feminist Research Centre in Aalborg  
Department of Development and Planning  
Aalborg University  
Fibigerstraede 2  
DK-9220 Aalborg Ö  
Phone: +45 98 158522

Print: Kopicentralen, Aalborg University, 1995

Layout: Inger Jensen and Ellen Nyrup Pedersen

ISSN: 0907-2179

FREIA's paper series contains working papers, papers for conferences and seminars, project descriptions, lecture manuscripts, chapters from books etc. The papers are made by researchers affiliated to FREIA or by researchers who have visited the centre. The paper series aims at spreading the knowledge of FREIA's activities, internally as well as externally. Editors of the series are Ann-Dorte Christensen and Ruth Emerik. The papers can be ordered at Aalborg University, Department of Development and Planning, phone: +45 98 158522, ext. 2452.

**Susanne Thorbek**

**Women's Participation in Slum  
Organizations -  
Does it Make a difference?**

Work in slum organizations is work with politics which set the ramifications for daily life, but it is also work with everyday life with small maybe, but important changes as well as with mobilizing other people.

Political life has its roots in the city - this is where the rulers of old days lived, the word political actually stems from polis - the city in greek. Later Gugler (1988) has shown how political movements have become centered on the city in the Third World - the peasant movements which made revolutions in the period after the Second World War seems for many reasons - one of them the migration to cities - a phenomenon of the past.

In Thailand, slum organizations are participating in politics: in struggles against eviction (often of public land), in discussions of laws pertaining to slum clearance, upgrading, resettlement or government loans and their conditions, and some may have participated in the democracy movement, although this was mostly middle-class based.

The work with changes in everyday life is likewise an unavoidable part of the tasks of slum organizations or movements. Slum settlements are often understood as small self-built houses on non-owned land and it follows that all the ramifications of everyday life such as water, sewage, garbage and very often too, health, education and so on, which can only be created collectively, most often by the state, are problematic. These problems are common for men and women but most of them are directly related to women's everyday work for the families, and thus of special relevance for women. These, or related issues, are high on the agenda of most slum organizations.

Relations between men and women change in connection with urbanization, and the notions of men and women seen as provider and housewife

becomes as well public knowledge as individual identities. Mies (1986) has coined the term "housewifezation" for this notion, and she points out that this means society, state, and quite often people themselves see the family as a unit with a provider and a housewife. She points out too, however, that the picture is false. Women have always worked and they do so in the cities as well, but their work is badly remunerated and hardly noticed at all, sometimes even stigmatized. She also claims that most of women's work does not enter the market (as work in the house) but this need not be true in the city. Even if women's work enters the market (labourmarket as well as market for commodities) it is hardly counted in statistics and badly paid compared to men's.

In Thailand women have worked and their work has at least partly been counted in statistics especially in agriculture. Myrdal (1968) claims that women in Thailand had the highest participation in the labour force in the world - a sign of the counting of women's work in agriculture. It is less now and less in the cities but in older times women were recognized as working. And today too, women's work is seen as natural (especially when they don't have children) and is not stigmatized systematically.

Still the responsibility for everyday life of the family is by and large women's and they are still considered housewives and thus concerned with the work of cleaning, childcare, cooking, washing etc at home.

## **Women and Politics, the Theoretical Framework**

Women's thinking about politics has been problematic in most contexts. Rossana Rossandra discusses this at length in a work from 1979, when the feminist movement in Italy was at its height. I have chosen her "dialogue with feminism" as a point of departure because some very fundamental dimensions of women's participation in politics as well as in

movements are discussed here and they may even help to highlight the differences between men's and women's work in slum organizations of Bangkok in anno 1993. Rossana Rossandra herself was a woman whose whole life was politics, a well known political figure in the Old and New Left in Italy and she has had great problems coming to terms with the new feminist movements, symbolically expressed: she was watching and waving at feminist demonstrations from the pavement, not walking along.

I will quote her summary of Sofokles' drama Antigone at some length since it seems to me to highlight important features in women's relationships to the state, power and politic.

Antigone contradicts the will of the state, personified by the Tyrant of Theben, Kreon. He has decided that one of Antigones brothers - who has fought against his own city and is killed outside the wall of the city - shall be left unburied. The traitor shall be humiliated in this last way. None of the inhabitants in Theben dare to go out and bury the corpse of the wicked brother, Polynaikos, none except Antigone. The Tragedy is introduced with her declaration that she will go out and bury him. The Chorus, people of Theben, follow her steps with concern. On one hand they fear the consequences this young and feeble women might bring about by her challenge of the tyrant. On the other hand they little by little become convinced that laws cannot be made by the tyrant alone, the state doesn't belong to one single person. Through the thinking about Antigone's act, the Chorus thus sees the dimension of the state and will no longer give the power away. The city shall be governed "by all", not "by one". Antigone thus becomes midwife for the idea of democracy.

But she is no "democrat". She does not challenge the tyrant because he has made the decision **alone**. Even if the whole city had decided that her brother should not be buried, Antigone would have challenged the whole city. She will bury him because to allow him to remain unburied would be going against the laws of nature, not to mention forsaking the duties of a relative ... She must bury her brother, who came as an enemy with an army in order to conquer the city and even make her, Antigone, a slave - even if he is a real enemy. But Polyneikos' wrongdoing belongs among people and politics. The bond of blood and compassion towards the dead is an unwritten law which nobody, not society, not a single person can eradicate.

She must bury her brother, take the corpse which lies torn and dismembered in the dust and give it humanity and dignity. This is the body a woman has born as a part of herself. When it dies she must give it back to the earth, she must wring it from the wind and the birds who will tear it apart and thus prohibit the soul from finding peace. Woman set it into the world and woman must give it back to earth. Nothing can stop her, not even the law of the state.

Antigone thus lead her people to democracy, but herself to death. She hangs herself in a grotto. It is as if there is no possibility for communication between the unwritten natural law which the woman stands for and the laws men have created.

Antigone becomes a metaphor for women's relationship to politics in Rossandras' dialogue with feminism, and it is worth noticing the difference between hers and Hegel's interpretation. Hegel see the drama as showing: "Antigone the woman, is passionately obsessed by interest in the family, Kreon, the man is passionately obsessed by the state",

(Published 1957. My translation from Danish ST) whereas Rossandra agrees with the view on Kreon but sees Antigone as passionately obsessed by natural law or by the sacred and her conscience, as much as the family. She argues this relationship historically too, and not least through interviews with very different women about politics.

In Thai history too, women have been kept out of politics. Most men were kept out too, but the Kings and the governors, the village headman and the district leaders have all been male. The national governments have for most periods of modern history been either military governments or strongly influenced by the military, and this is a sphere, which both in terms of actual recruitment and in terms of ideology, have created strong male images. The most outspoken example is probably Sarit and the image of a *naak lææng* he created. (Chaloemtiarana 1979)

In political protest movements women seem to have been there, they have participated, from the 1932 Revolution to the democracy movement of today, but maybe very much like in the West, as those doing the work, more than as leaders and without openings to formulate their own ideas.

If the image of Antigone is meaningful, women's relationship to politics may be seen as reserved, if not outright hostile. This may have roots in the ways the power centres have kept women out, as well as in women's own needs pointing in other directions, like Antigone's to natural law and not least towards other people and to her conscience.

It is worth taking a look too at how insights are formulated by Rossandra and the women she interviewed: Relating to the housewife discussion on p 2 and its relevance for women in politics, Rossandra says:

The first contradiction (between women and politics (ST)), women at once experience, is .. between the time of politics and the time of life. It is not just a question of schedules, and making meeting times. It is two levels that don't have any connection with each other. A politically active woman must always jump from the one to the other. She lives on both levels and conflicts and feelings of alienation crop up, now on this level and now on another. And she feels guilty on both.

The importance of personal relationships which women often feel also in politics is expressed in the following way by a young woman who answers a question about why women don't participate in politics:

I think it is a question of the personal relations which carries the political work, as it always has been practised .... I think that women need a person standing before them in order to express themselves and change something. A person who act as a person - unveiled.

What she stresses here is woman's interest in human relationships and not just generalized or abstract categories, but also that the person is unveiled, is different, a person. This is summed up by Rossandra in the introduction to this interview:

They accepted only equality as a condition for difference. Women who are always treated differently seem to fear the generalization of juridical systems, in rules and norms and even of the political language.

In the introduction Syberg argues that

It is a female trait to look for detail

and she goes on arguing that this is exactly what Rossandra herself does. And this does seem to be three important characteristics of women; their concern, their interest in **personal relationships**, their focus on **differences** and the need to see and feel it, to look for concrete, actual, experienced life instead of abstract categorizations, and their interest in **details**.

The last point I wish to mention from Rossandra is about women's relationship to institutions:

that women should move in two directions both inside and outside the institutions of society, but keep the knowledge that they can not follow their real nature inside the institutions ...

Women have their experiences from a multitude of very close relationships between persons and their social character is built on other criteria than the abstract one of juridical equality, power and rights which have been the foundation of institutions and the state in our civilization .....

Feminism insists stubbornly on another foundation for law, - which is still only dimly perceivable.

The main trend in relations between men and women in the Third World is the housewification of women - that is the notion of provider/housewife relations, and although women in Thailand work with much more than housework, these ideas are widespread.

Women's relations to politics are in the West problematic, Rossandra shows the drama of Antigone as an image of women's relation to politics - and at the height of the feminist movement in Italy she discusses this question with feminists (and other women) and shows how women seem to feel a contradiction between the abstract, generalized norms, rules and language of politics and the personal, always different and detailed, concretely lived experiences of women. Men too, of course, live concrete lives, but the experiences from their daily life seem to mean less for most men's personalities. (S. Harding 1986).

The feminist movement organized itself according to such ideas, as is well known with very little, if any, structure with small groups where lived experiences could be exchanged and on the assumption that in so far as political action became necessary women could then create such. At the height of the movement such actions were usually imaginative as well as often very provocative.

### **The Focus of the Study**

The focus of this study then, is on how men and women in slum organizations/Peoples' Organizations in Bangkok perceive men and women, their experiences with men's and women's work in the organizations and the perspectives which the differences between men and women give.

In order to discuss such questions I chose 3 NGOs (Foster Parent, and Urban Community Development Center, Duang Prateep Foundation and the related Grassroot Institute) the 3 associations of slum-organizations or Peoples Organizations (POs) related to these (13 Cooperating Communities of Thonburi and Bangkok, Union of Slum Development Association (USDA) and Confederation of Khlong Toey Communities)

and a more or less random sample of individual slum organizations, each organizing in a single community, for further study.

The NGOs have a somewhat different background but they all work with related issues. Duang Prateep Foundation is the oldest and it is run as an institution giving scholarships to pupils, running a kindergarten and a crèche, sometimes attempting to create income-generating work and offering all kinds of services, including information about AIDS and activities which can contribute to a better life for children as well as adults. Duang Prateep and the Grassroot Institute are involved in the democracy struggle. Both Foster Parent and the Urban Community Development Center strongly stress peoples' self-organization and have helped to create saving groups, Foster Parent, the rice-cooperative and the associations of slum-communities related to each, also struggles against eviction and policy matters, such as pressuring the government on different issues and proposing the Slum Law.

I interviewed 17 men and 22 women in these organizations, on different levels, both professional staff in the NGOs and "volunteers", that is people living in the slums and engaged in the organizations as leaders or activists.

In the organizations where I interviewed, women and men were participating differently in organizations and in leadership. In the Duang Prateep Foundation there is a woman leader, women participate in the organization but men have dominant positions. Ms. Prateep has talked about the difficulties, as she see it, in making women take responsibility. In the Grassroot Institute and the related Confederation of Khlong Toey Communities there is an almost all male leadership. In Foster Parent there is a mixture with 8 women and 2 men in the Slum association (and 2 men, 1 woman working as professionals). In Urban Community

Development Center there is an all female staff in the NGO and almost the same number of men and women in the association (USDA) but here the women are doubly organized, participating both in the main committee as well as having their own group "The Housewife Group", which is parallel to 3 other groups (Housing Fund, Local Aid Team and the Full Time Staff).

### **The Notion of Provider and Housewife**

The notion of housewife and provider for women and men was very widespread and generally accepted. The only organization which had a women group, USDA, named this the housewife group - this was how the women saw themselves.

It was however not predefined what the concept of a housewife meant. One of the members of the housewife group (Pa Roi) explained when asked:

Men would only do one thing, that is earning a living. We also do the same thing, that is earning a living and at the same time we have to look after the children, the family and do the housework too. So if we look carefully women are busier than men. Men who work and also help their family to do housework are very few. Only 2-3 in a hundred.

In fact quite a few women saw the housewife in terms differently from most men. Thus a female leader in another slum organization (Phantip) accepted the dominant view and even strengthened it, but her own experiences did not confirm the consequences of being a housewife, which she had first outlined.

She described women as lagging behind and used the expression that a woman is like a frog in a coconut shell and explained men's lack of participation in their committee from the same division of labour:

We did not think about men and women in this group. When we first organized the group, men thought that they are the leaders of the family, they could not do this work. They have to have an occupation. At first there were a few but later they came no more. Now we only have two men in the committee out of eight. I don't blame them. They have their families to take care of, some have money problems. Men are leaders of their families, they have responsibility to the family.

Her reply is extremely interesting, her own path to the work in the organization taken into account, which she told us about a bit later in the interview:

My community already had a committee, but nobody did anything. So I thought how can we get people to do something, but I didn't know how to push people. Then I talked to everyone, I talked to my husband too and convinced them that we have to do something or nothing would change. I chose men for the (new) committee only. I did not participate in the discussions but only wrote the report of the meeting. Later on it did not work out well either and sister Amporn and I had to do the Work.

Her friend and co-leader (Amporn) in the rice-cooperative they had organized, had got the idea to create a rice-cooperative in the beginning, presented it to her colleagues as well as at a seminar. She explained how she got the idea in the following way:

I was an employee in a small grocery store before. They delivered us rice once a month. At the end of the month we collected money for them. Then I thought that in fact we could do this ourselves, giving the profit to the group and the dividend could be shared among the members instead of giving profit to the others.

Men often defined the concept of the housewife in fairly limiting ways. Worst in the following case where a male leader explained:

Yes I think that women can also work well. But here at the Grand Committee there is a huge responsibility. People who work here must work for their own community and also serve the whole 20 communities, so its rather demanding. A woman usually has to take care of her family, her children and the household jobs. A woman has less time to come away from her house, her community, than men have, when compared. So many of them work better at the small community level .....

and later

there are less than 5% women in the community committees. Some communities have none.

Another male leader expressed the same point of view:

Personally, I think women still lag behind their male counterparts. But men have to shoulder more responsibilities, such as family support, housing and income whereas women are responsible for children, cooking and lots of other things.

One male leader, however, saw some potential in the housewife too. He mentioned that women were less corrupted by society because they participated less. And several thought that women should have a chance to participate.

Some, mainly women, explained the gender notions as repressive traditions now outgrown by reality, for instance a women leader (Noi) who said:

The inequality between men and women is deeply rooted in our history, women must be under the control of men. Men are the front feet of the elephant and women are the rear feet. But now a days it should be so that men and women can switch their roles. Women can be fore feet and men can be rear feet or vice versa. Now women don't just feed babies and cook anymore, now we have women doctors.

Thus the concept of the housewife was generally accepted, but it was interpreted in different ways. Most saw it as a repressive situation for women some because it makes life very limited, others because it gives a lot of unrecognized work. But the gender notions of provider and housewife were the starting point for any discussion on women in organizations.

It is noteworthy, however, that some notions about women were **not** expressed: the idea that young women should be virgins, married women ought to stay in their house in order to be chaste, and the like. The just quoted young, professional woman mentioned that other people wanted their daughters to be virgins, but nobody else made the link between sexual behaviour and moral virtue so often heard in other countries and none defined women through other family roles than the housewife.

Even the concept of housewife was understood as involving quite a bit of work and responsibility, and not as somebody who simply stayed inside the house.

Thus the notions of housewife and provider may be common to several modern urban cultures, but it is still formed differently and the Thai notions seems to stress the work and the responsibility of housewives.

## **Power and People**

How are men's and women's work in slum organizations experienced? From the interviews, the tendency of a gender division of interests was made clear. Men were interested in power and in **politics**. This could be on different levels. In the single slum organizations, men were usually those who had the contacts and made the negotiations with the public authorities, be it about instalment of water meters or contact to the public job centre. At the level of the associations, the same interest was there, be it pressuring the government to create a new law (the slum bill as it was called) or establishing a mini-hospital, and at the level of the NGO some men were likewise extremely interested in power and the state. At the last two levels, however, women were also active in national or semi national politics, but as we shall see, their ways of thinking on the issues were different.

Thus, an NGO male leader, Sompong, from the Grassroot Institute explained how the funding and the daily work went on. He thought men were more interested in politics and women more in social problems. Then he went into overall politics and told about a Congress of the Urban Poor where links were made to poor people's organizations in provincial towns too, a new feature of Thai politics:

People are linked together, mostly people of my age. We fought the dictatorship together and were friends. Now we are doctors, newspaper-people, leaders of NGOs. Because we had the network and the power we were able to push and make the movement a success. The majority of us are of my age group, we joined the communist party in the 70's, but that is eradicated now. The communist party failed but people's movement goes on. This is the reason behind the strength of the democracy movement - it isn't like Indonesia. After the last election people here got involved with politics, also the rural people. They understand much, - they want to participate - our strength is greater than the votes show.

A male leader from USDA likewise told about the politics in the associations' work:

The most important job now is to try to push the government to solve problems, most importantly, the problems of piped water, electricity, house-registration and gambling. The second problem is housing, where a long term solution is needed ... Concerning physical development, quality of life, the government has not paid much attention. They see us as outlaws, living in squalid gambling and crime infested areas. They don't try to solve the problems, but we try to make it their policy to do so ... This committee feeds them information, concrete information about how to solve our problems. We submitted a petition with signatures to the government ....

At the level of single slum organizations, a similar picture evolved. One male leader talked about the committee and the volunteer group (the committee consisted of 16 men and 2 women, the volunteer group of 20 women and 2-3 men, none of them paid):

The most important activity is to develop skills and provide work for our people,

and now they were distributing scholarships to the children too. He told at length about negotiations for re-housing because the harbour wanted 5 neighbourhoods (block 7-12) evicted. The negotiations had been going on for four years now and a place was found, quite a few common buildings (car-parking, community hall, sanitation station, nursing centre, library, police station, an arena, water recycling-station) and roads were to be constructed, the area had been accepted by the Khlong Toey inhabitants, the two outstanding problems were money (who should pay how much) and the time it would take to make the place ready. A saving group had been started last year.

The interview took place in a local center the committee had created with a small soft drink bar, a few bob-games, chairs and tables. It was nice and clean with a few young people hanging around.

When the leader talked about the committee and the volunteers he was talking of the organization in the whole of Klong Toey which was related to Duang Prateep Foundation and included among the volunteers those involved in the anti-drug struggle. He was himself nominated as model father that year.

In another single slum organization, a man who was not active in the organization of the slum but was listening to our conversation, was drawn into it. My interpreter asked him why he did not do any work in the organization, he ought to help his wife. And he answered first by saying he was too busy earning money for the family and then said:

But if something important comes up. If there are big problems. If a demonstration comes, then I will help them.

Thus he expressed his view that the daily work in the slumsettlement was less important than a demonstration, and if such an important thing happened he would join.

The women in the organizations talked about other issues, more practical, more related to **their personal experiences** and when they talked about politics it was in another way.

One of the leaders at the level of NGOs Somsook Boonyabahang talked for instance about the slum bill, and she was certainly involved in that work. But she talked about it as an example of different evaluations of political possibilities which could arise between the Peoples Organizations and herself. And her main interest in the work was very much centered on her role as inspirator or supporter for people's own organizing. She explained to me about her ideas in the following way:

I find it very interesting to work through a people's process. It is all too easy to think about forms and structures and forget the people - and it is a challenge to work with and through people, to see them choose a committee, to discuss, to have them as participants in the process, to watch them make the decisions, to see them learn the technicalities and to see how they know every single step in the project. But the process is not enough, they must also get tangible results, their goals.

In one case I worked with a project where we were to build new houses, and to work with them on the design, the demolition and the building - they really became experts and now they go to other

communities and explain both about the whole process and the practical steps in demolition, design and building. It can be a real people's process in building, and they can learn the whole thing and do it themselves.

I like it when people do things you thought they could not do, but they know their friends, their problems, their wishes, they can do it themselves and you can leave for other work.

Sometimes people push for their interests, but they do it in a wrong way and you have to start over again. And sometimes the government doesn't know what to do, and the people don't know either - it is an ongoing process.

Such work is important but the sustained work among people is also difficult, they often fight among themselves and there is a lot of politics in the slums too. In a way it is like stagnant water you have to **through** it. But if you can get things moving, and people work together, day by day, often in small things, then they move little by little and get success and get some, maybe small, but tangible results.

The big issues, the overall objectives often bring in a lot of discussion and disharmony and nothing happens.

Lipservice may be a problem too, but I think I have moved things a little bit forward.

One of the female leaders (Phantip) was, besides being active in the rice-coop also a leader in the committee working against evictions, with re-

housing and with savings and loan groups. She was responsible for the administration of huge sums. She explained:

We know more now about how our country is developing. In the past for instance we did not know how the National Housing Authority was working or what the government did.

We did not have any ideas about it. Now, when we have been organized we keep studying together, on and on. We have to do things, take responsibility and see for ourselves.

It is good to know how the Housing Authority works. They told us they were going to construct roads for us (in a re-housing scheme (ST)), later we realized that many contradictory processes were going on, and some corruption too. The benefit of what they do doesn't reach the villagers. Maybe we want them to do this thing instead of that. Now we can keep up with their tricks.

First we thought that it was good the NHA would help us, but that is not the case. They want something in return, they want power over the villagers and they want us to pay an interest rate of 12 % p.a. - and if it takes more than 3 years to repay the loan even 15-16 % p.a.

We know much more now. When we work we coordinate what we do with a lot of other people, we cooperate and that makes us understand and know. Even though we are women we are capable of helping others. We inform them of things which are useful to the others who still don't know so much. That makes me proud. Personally I love this work and will help as much as I can.

This woman is deeply involved in relationships to the NHA and criticize their work as well as their interest-policy. Her concerns, however, are very much for the people she works with and her own development, learning by doing and helping others by passing the knowledge on. Her way of looking at the political work is also much more personalized than for instance Sampong's. Although he too tells me about the importance of the network he is part of, she places the weight on how her work is changing her, and hopefully creating change for others, whereas Sampong's intentions are more general and abstract.

The way men and women relate to generalised statements, **rules and norms** were discussed by two men in an interview in Duang Prateep Foundation, both academic staff working in offices, in the following way:

Men are not as fussy, but women go more into details. When women work they consider work thoroughly and in detail whereas men stick more to the principles, to the rules. This doesn't mean that thoroughness is bad in fact it is very good ... There are two levels when we say we stick to the principles. I realize fully how important it is to stick to principles when you work with a lot of people. You have to have rules and principles and follow them. But at other times, in special cases these rules and principles cannot be applied, they are in fact unnatural for any human being and for any organization. If you claim the rules without really looking into the substance then it becomes only a justification for avoiding conflicts or problems. But if you are clear enough that this is not an exception and use the principles properly, then it is OK.

Another man from the staff agreed with the characterization of men's and women's work, but thought that women made the whole work place into a family, discussing the cases, sharing work between them on the same case, being inefficient and worse, made a lot of fuss about the personal relationships. The women who worked in another office here agreed, they liked their work a lot and thought of their colleagues as friends, - having a good time together, sharing the work and helping each other.

Thus, women in this case too were more occupied with personal relationships whilst men looked more at the efficiency and not least at the general rules and norms of the work.

Women's interest in the details of everyday life and in people also meant that they could listen to and allow **differences**. Thus, one female slum-leader explained that she would rather go with her friend to 3 meetings with small groups in a new community than she would arrange one big meeting, even if that meant she had to repeat everything.

And another said that in their almost all-women committee they could disagree more easily, talk it over and still be friends when they met again. She gave an example about the organization of the Childrens Day, where some in the committee did not want to use the organization's money but she and others thought they should. The disagreement was solved in a very satisfactory way. She bought flowers and arranged and prepared them with her friends. They then sold the flowers at the Childrens' Day, and so they got enough money to cover the expenses and even a little surplus. She also told us how she had handled the drug addicts who used to assemble outside her door, by asking those coming from other communities to leave, shouting at them and explaining and discussing with those from her own community whom she knew beforehand.

Another example of women's acceptance of differences was told to me in a community when I asked for the problems they met during their work. A female leader gave an example of her round of collecting money for the rice. One woman had no money. She knew this was true and that the woman had children, and she gave her credit. The other members complained, but she believed in the woman and besides she "followed the money" and collected them later.

Connected to the women's interest in people they were also seen as more communicative, talking more and enjoying talking with different people. In one case this was seen as a strength women had in the organizations. We asked:

Auntie, do you really think a woman could be a community leader?

and she answered:

I believe so, because women are more tolerant, they tend to not fight verbally or physically. Women tolerate more than men do. Men burst out at anything, they tend to confront each other, argue and become furious. Men love to use their strength, they become furious. Men love to use their strength, they become forceful leaders, but women are more tolerant.

A male leader in the same association (USDA) told us that women could work in the organization as well as men and maybe better since they did not drink or smoke or fool around but put time to their work. And then added:

Thai people tend to believe what women say. When men and women talk about the same thing they tend to listen more to women, maybe because they are more cunning. They know how to talk sweet and pleasingly, and still it comes from their heart.

He also said that women were better when it comes to negotiations with the government, because they are more gentle and polite, men are more angry whereas women know how to bargain. When it comes to demonstrations too, more women participate, a woman in the same group explained because they go to each other, they have a network which joins them, whereas men are here and there and everywhere, but without a group.

At evictions women confront the police and nobody gets hurt whereas men get into fights and,

she added:

both men and women go forward and fight together but often with the woman in front.

The women in the housewives' group said too, that women are better at going to new communities and organize because it is the women who stay in the house during the day and they, as women, can get closer and more friendly towards other women, as they thought they were in the "Housewives's Group", where they easily understood each other and felt close.

When they talked with men these often understood things in a different way.

If women are more concerned with the daily life, with other people and close relationships to different people, it may be logical if they are more responsible for the daily work with details and people too. This was at least what several women and men claimed.

This was also what I saw. In the anti-drug struggle at the Grassroot Institute we interviewed both the model father and the model mother, both engaged in this work (along with a few other men and women). I found it typical that the male leader from the anti-drug struggle told me what they had achieved, that is to get the dealers arrested and the addicts cured. He did not want to answer questions about whether he knew those who sold drugs now, or whether the addicts had returned to their old habits or if new ones had come to. In fact, my feeling was that he did not know.

The women we interviewed on the other hand, told in detail about what they did, how the trade was going and how the cures for the addicts worked, as well as how parents could get their children out of jail if they paid a fine to the police. She knew the details and this was exactly what the model father said:

The women know all the details.

We have seen to that it was a women who worked in the rice-coop, and the main reason they gave for this was that men could not work for an organization if they were not paid for the work. An explanation about how one woman came into the work of the organization shows too that she felt both eager and responsible. She carried out the work with her friend when the meetings ended up in just talk and arguments.

In another single-slum community organization, we asked about men's and women's work and was told the following:

For example, in the next community there is only one woman in the committee and the 5 or 6 others are men. When they decide on something none of the men do anything but the woman does it alone, collects the money and deposits it in the coop. Consequently, the woman doesn't like to work with men.

And a man who was a member of the group said:

We can see and learn from other communities that there are many problems in a committee where there are mostly men.

The woman:

The problem is that men make the decisions but they don't do anything. However, in our community, these two men have been chosen among the best.

The man:

In other communities men work very little, but in our community I work a lot.

And in still another one the male leader had ambivalent thoughts about women in the organization. He said:

We think that women are slow in thinking, they pay a lot of attention to details.

But later in the interview he pointed to another aspect:

Men, they drink, they smoke, they gamble. If women are engaged in development work they will surely do better than men because they are neat and don't fool around.

Thus, in the slum organizations or Peoples Organizations people were aware that women worked in a continuous fashion with the many small things which make any organization run smoothly. In the NGOs we did not hear any thing of this kind, both men and women seemed to work continuously, but they were of course paid, even if the salaries were not very high.

One of the female NGO leaders, Somsook Boonyahabang, expressed the differences between men's and women's work in the organizations in the following way.

One of our problems is that the big hierarchical organizations easily lose their basis in people's active work, and thus their influence. You can see this in the relationships between men and women, where you find more hierarchy and more structure you will find fewer women. Where you find women working actively in an organization, this is sign of continuous and sustained work.

The interviews thus show a difference in men's and women's interests. Of course not all women acted and thought in a similar way, there were as great differences between them as there were between men. Especially the women from the Housewife Group were proud of their roles as women in the organization and saw both men's and women's contributions. Surely there are similarities between men and women too and one of the organizations had not given the gender question any

thoughts before I asked, they said, both at the level of the NGO and the association (Foster Parent).

The differences were by and large connected to the housewife/provider dimension as this is interpreted in Thailand, and sometimes to Thai traditions, though most often when impossible questions were discussed such as why men drink or take narcotics much more than women, or why women are more calm and tolerant.

The differences between men and women, and especially women's needs, interests and ways of working are not always legitimate to express in Thailand, as they aren't in the West, especially when they are considered positive or lead to a challenge of men's greater power. Thus differences between the genders may in fact be underestimated and the impact of women's work in slum organizations may thus be greater than interviews can reveal.

This may especially be the case where women are few in organizations dominated by men, or if the organizations in question is strictly organized in accordance to fixed rules and regulations and not willing or able to adjust to women's needs or to recognize their work and contributions.

As the interviews here show, however, it seems there are some differences which are typical for men's and women's work in slum-organizations. Men were normally much more interested in politics or in power and they talked about such matters in fairly abstract and general terms, whereas women often drew their own experiences into the picture.

Women were much more interested in individuals and often attempted to work in a fashion where the individuality of different persons could be

recognized and expressed. Women seemed too, more interested in the details of daily life, and seemed to prefer work which they could see as useful to concrete people, also in the short run. These different interests were probably part of the reason for women working with many small, seemingly tedious things in a continual fashion.

Thus women's distance to politics, the way their political work was embedded in personal relationships and their priority of daily life and other people must be seen as part of the reasons for their hard, day-to-day work for the organizations.

## **Does Women's Participation and Leadership in Slum Organizations Make a Difference?**

Women's participation does make a difference, and the first and maybe most important one has not been discussed here. Because women did actually participate to some degree in all organizations and the issues the organizations worked with are closely connected to the welfare of the people in slum-settlements and most of them with issues of special relevance for women. Women who are responsible for the daily work in the families, independent of whether or not they work for incomes too. (Thorbeck 1987)

In one case, however, I interviewed an association which had a leadership of nearly only men (1 woman, 9 men) and the man we spoke with was working with health problems in a men-only sub-committee. He explained the lack of women with their role as housewives. More to the point, the work he did only catered for men's health problems because men would only go to a doctor when they were near death, whereas women could manage with hospitals and drugstores, he said. Men's need for health care was most pressing because they had serious work-related accidents. But under pressure, he admitted that women giving birth to children were also important, they just did not have the resources needed to care for them. Asked about which health problems men had, he mentioned liver-illness on account of a too high alcohol consumption as the first. This was an exception, but it illustrates that women's participation is of importance if their problems are to be noticed in slum organizations.

People regard men and women as provider and housewife and this may, as Rossandra pointed out, contribute to an uneasiness and feeling of guilt on the women's part when working in politics because the two levels home and politics don't easily combine. Only one woman (Phantip)

mentioned problems of this kind, because her children were in school age and she had difficulties being away from home, and her husband was "huang" (jealous/possessive), too.

But she did not seem to feel guilt as seen in the interview with her. Even if few expressed such feelings they may still exist and may be an important barrier for the many women who do not participate. A further involvement of women as activists and leaders may lead to a much stronger expression of the family's importance and the demands it makes on both men and women.

The lived experiences of men and women are to a large degree expressed by the concepts of provider and housewife, although interpreted fairly broadly in a single interview, and in all seen as a characterization of activities and work, not of sexual morality, which certainly leaves more room of manoeuvre for women. (Thorbeck 1994)

However, this categorization of men and women obviously doesn't fit the experiences of the women, which are much more varied than what is implied in the term housewife. The categories provider/housewife is the ruling concept but it doesn't fit women's actual experiences.

In a former in-depth study I have shown that women in a small section of Khlong Toey had a broad or varied basis for their identity, which could be built up around their work, their role as mother or wife, their open mind, their friendships or several of these.

Remarkably, they did not identify themselves mainly with their roles in the family (daughter, mother, grandmother/-widow), and not even with their work for the family (housewife).

The problem in the concept of housewife is that it defines women in a way which for the first conceals the activities married women actually do, such as earning incomes, building communities, participating in politics and so on, and secondly implies that women ought to be housewives, to marry, to do housework and to have children. Thirdly, the concept of housewife also implies a provider, usually defined as head of household (meaning leader of the family) but in the word of one of the interviewed women:

Women should be leaders in the home too.

This possibility is less open if women are predefined in the role of housewife. Thus the abstract category of housewife tends to limit women's possibilities, both in society and in their own thoughts on, and formulations of, their experiences and needs.

The experiences men and women expressed about the two gender's work in slum organizations were related to the differences between men's and women's participation in politics which R. Rossandra pointed out. Men expressed a greater interest in politics proper, understood as the relations to the state and its institutions. When women talked about politics they did it in ways which, to a higher degree stressed the communicative aspects of this kind of work, than the victories/defeats.

Women were more preoccupied with the concrete lived experiences and with the activities or changes which can make a difference in their and their fellows' lives. They are not very interested in the abstractions but with concrete changes, maybe small, but still changes which make a difference for people.

This interest in concrete experiences, in people, is connected to their interest in details and maybe even more so to their communicative attitudes and abilities, and this is important both in negotiations with the government, confrontations with the police and inside the organization when it comes to cooperation with other communities, organizing in such, as well as inside the organizations where they may contribute to less competition and fewer power struggles.

Women then, contribute to the slum organizations by their daily responsible work, their priorities on people, their acceptance of differences, choosing small groups, bending rules and in their softening of confrontations with the government and police.

The differences between men's and women's priorities and ways of working can thus be seen as complementary and useful.

It can be argued that men both formulate politics and are seemingly more radical, keep up claims for the governments responsibility for the situation, demands loans and investments and probably too, can mobilize crowds at demonstrations and political events (although this contradicts one of the women's statements) while women keep the organizations running.

Two main problems are involved however. Women are sometimes doing the work while men formulate the policies and this raises two questions. The first is the risk that women end up as mainly cheap labour, as they do in so many other contexts in Thailand and worldwide. This is very much a question of gender struggle of making men see and value women's contributions to the organizations.

The other question is related to the relative lack (there are, as shown, outstanding exceptions) of women's formulation of policies. In so far as these have an impact, it is a loss if women's experiences and needs in the details of everyday life are not incorporated in policy formulations. This is, however, a tricky problem as Rossandra shows, since all policies so far have been expressed in the abstract language of rules and laws which excludes the differences and details among people in their daily life. On the other hand more and better openings for talks and formulations which build on or include the everyday experiences of women, will not only enrich the policies pursued with women's point of view but with men's as well, since it is hardly thinkable that only women would get a hearing.

Therefore, women today participate in a relatively high degree as activists and leaders of slum organizations and this contribute both to the choice of issues and the sustained work of the organizations. If more women participated as activists and in the formulations of policies still other experiences and needs might be focused upon and the work in the basis of the organizations and thus their influence, agenda and ability to sustained work, might get strengthened.

## **Literature:**

Chaloemtiarana, Thak (1979): **Thailand, The Politics of Despotism and Paternalism**. Thammasat University, Printing Press.

Gelsted, Otto (1957): **Græsk Drama**, Copenhagen. My translation from Danish, (ST).

Gugler, (1988): **Urbanization in the Third World**. New York.

Harding, Sandra (1986): **The Science Question in Feminism**. New York.

Mies, Maria (1986): **Patriarchy and Global Accumulation of Capital**. London, Zed Press.

Myrdal, G. (1968): **An Asian Drama**.

Rossandra, Rossana (1979): **Halvdelen af jorden - dialog med feminism**. Politisk Revy. Translated from Italian: Le Altre, 1979.

Sofokles (?): **Antigone**. Copenhagen. Translated to Danish by Niels Møller.

Thorbek, Susanne (1987): **Voices from the City, Women og Bangkok**. Zed Books, 1987.

Thorbek, Susanne (1994): **Gender and Slum Culture in Urban Asia**. Sage, India Zed Books, 1994.

## **Publications in FREIA's paper series:**

1. Karin Widerberg: Udfordringer til kvinneforskningen i 1990'erne - foredrag på Center for Kvinneforskning i Aalborg 10.5.90, 1992.
2. Feminist Research. Aalborg University. Report 1976-1991, 1992.
3. Ann-Dorte Christensen: Kvinder i den nye fredsbevægelse i Danmark - mellem køkkenruller, resolutioner og teltpæle, 1992.
4. Ulla Koch: Uformel økonomi og social arbejdsdeling - en fortælling om tværfaglighed og det umuliges kunst, 1992.
5. Marianne Rostgaard: Kvindearbejde og kønsarbejdsdeling i tekstilindustrien i Danmark ca. 1830 - 1915, 1992.
6. Inger Agger: Køn og krænkelse - om politisk vold mod kvinder, 1992.
7. Margrethe Holm Andersen: Heks, hore eller heltinde? - et case-studie om tanzanianske kvinders politiske deltagelse og kønsideologier i forandring, 1993.
8. Ulla Koch: A Feminist Political Economics of Integration in the European Community - an outline, 1993.
9. Susanne Thorbek: Urbanization, Slum Culture, Gender Struggle and Women's Identity, 1993.
10. Susanne Thorbek: Køn og Urbanisering, 1994.
11. Poul Knopp Damkjær: Kvinder & rektorstillinger - et indlæg i ligestillingsdebatten, 1994.
12. Birte Siim: Det kønnede demokrati - kvinders medborgerskab i de skandinaviske velfærdsstater, 1994.
13. Anna-Birte Ravn: Kønsarbejdsdeling - diskurs og magt, 1994.
14. Bente Rosenbeck: Med kønnet tilbage til den politiske historie, 1994.
15. Jytte Bang og Susanne Stubgaard: Piger og fysik i gymnasiet, 1994.
16. Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen og Monica Rudberg: Jenter og gutter i forandring, 1994.
17. Jane Lewis: Gender, Family and the Study of Welfare 'Regimes', 1995

18. Iris Rittenhofer: *A Roll in the Hay with the Director: The Manager in a Genderhistorical Perspective*, 1995.
19. Ruth Emerek: *On the Subject of Measuring Women's (and Men's) Participation in the Labour Market*, 1995.
20. Maren Bak: *Family Research and Theory in Denmark: A Literature Review*, 1995.
21. Ann-Dorte Christensen & Birte Siim: *Gender, Citizenship and Political Mobilization*, 1995.
22. Hanne Marlene Dahl: *Contemporary Theories of Patriarchy - Like a Bird without Wings? Power, Signification and Gender in the Reproduction of Patriarchy*, 1995.
23. Lene Klitrose: *Moving far beyond the Separated Fields of Patriarchal Scholarship: the Qualitative Leap of Philosophical Daring*, 1995.
24. Ulla Koch: *Omsorgsbegrebet i lyset af international økonomisk integration - begrebs- og metodediskussion*, 1995.
25. Karen Sjørup: *Patriarkatet og det kvindelige subjekt*, 1995.
26. Susanne Thorbek: *Women's Participation in Slum Organizations - Does it Make a Difference?* 1995.

FREIA - the Feminist Research Centre in Aalborg is an interdisciplinary organization of feminist researchers at Aalborg University. Focus of the centre lies within the social sciences, especially the fields of anthropology, history, sociology/-social science, political science, economics and development studies. The present research programme "Gender relations - power, identity and social change" forms the framework of a number of individual and collective projects. FREIA is part of the Department of Development and Planning at Aalborg University.