



# COVID-19 Crisis and Women in Asia

Reflections from COVID-19 and the Prospects for  
Gender Justice in Thailand

Coeli Barry, Mahidol University

With Harpreet Kahlon, Independent Researcher



# **COVID-19 Crisis and Women in Asia**

Reflections from COVID-19 and the  
Prospects for Gender Justice in Thailand

November 2023



# Contents

---

Introduction	1
Gender inequality in Thailand	4
Gender equality and policy-making	7
Conclusion and Recommendations for advancing gender justice post-COVID	11
References	13



# Introduction

---

The pandemic caused disruptions globally in the lives of women and girls. The UN Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women (2020) highlighted that the impacts of the pandemic were magnified for women and girls “simply by virtue of their sex” across multiple sectors such as health, economy, security, and social protection. The social and economic fallout during the pandemic dampened the progress towards achieving gender equality in meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2022). In Thailand, the pandemic had a gendered impact, affecting highly feminised industries such as the food service industry, tourism, and education. There was a visible lack of social protections for women who were forced out of work during the lockdowns. Inequality was also evident in the gender roles prescribed by the status quo, whereby women became caretakers of the elderly, the children, and the sick. The inequalities were far more noticeable for marginalised groups of women, like those in the informal sector, those with precarious residency status or those in rural areas with little to no access to resources such as healthcare.

The heightened gender inequalities during the pandemic did not come as a surprise in Thailand, where inequality between men and women is pervasive. On the surface, women make up a significant percentage of the economy; are socially active and engaged in the community; enjoy political participation; and have access to education, healthcare, and social protections. Looking more closely, however, there is a different picture, such as the one captured in the Global Gender Gap Report 2022. The report measured gender gap across four dimensions: economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, and ranked Thailand overall at 79 out of 148 countries. Thailand measured unevenly in the four dimensions, ranking 15th in economic participation and opportunity, 92nd in educational attainment, 37th in health and survival, and 130th in political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2022). The varying ranks are indicative of the gender inequality across sectors and the uphill battle for those engaged in seeking gender justice in the country.

The work of closing gender gaps and achieving gender equality needs to be pursued at multiple levels. It entails shifts in policy to end discrimination and structural reforms to advance the rights of women, as well as

changing cultural norms, so that women are considered equal to men. In Thailand, gender inequality is closely linked to power and the structures of governance. Political power has been firmly vested in the hands of men and male-dominated institutions, with little impetus to advance gender equality. There are not only gendered patterns in the various social, economic, and political dimensions in Thailand, but also a lack of gendered policy responses. Essential to a full picture of gender justice are critical analyses of gendered socio-cultural patterns, what or who perpetuates them, and what policy responses are formulated by decision-makers, which are unpacked in this paper.

Gender justice is commonly understood as defining and shaping the policies, structures, and decisions so that women enjoy full equality and equity with men in all spheres of life (OXFAM, 2023). Htun and Weldon (2018, p. 3) state that gender justice amounts to a challenge to established patterns of cultural value and that, to fully realise gender equality, change is required not only at the macro-level but also at the micro-level, in the daily lives of people. Working from these two understandings of gender justice allows for a more nuanced picture of gender inequality and the challenges to gender justice in Thailand.

## Terminology

This discussion on gender justice in Thailand begins by establishing clarity in our approach to gender and its alignment with the concept of gender justice. The evolving understanding of gender, shifting from binary formulations to a more inclusive perspective, is acknowledged. However, these changes are not universally embraced and there can be diversity even within groups supporting the goals of gender justice. Policymakers and policy studies often employ their own language, creating gaps between those in government, research, or advocacy circles; such gaps have an implication for how policy interventions are formulated and how resources are directed to different groups or issues (Mackie, 2013). As words and terms travel they get translated and some terms may find resonance more readily than others, depending on the setting or the people using them.

Thai-language publications and Thailand-based advocacy highlight some of the consequences of

translation and adaptation. Thai-language publications and Thailand-focused advocacy also highlight inconsistencies and inaccuracies in some terminologies used regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics. For example, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and having an intersex variation are widely conflated with each other (UNDP and MSDHS, 2018). Additionally, gender stereotypes often categorize people into either male or female with specific expectations of how a man or woman should behave and this further contributes to the marginalization of those with non-binary gender identities.

***Thai terminology and language conceptions of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression.***

This study adopts a critical perspective regarding the common practice of equating the category of gender with women, often relying on a binary formulation and presuming women's gender identity to match their sex assigned at birth. The paper addresses this reality while drawing from international sources, recognizing that implicit or explicit binary norms of biological men and women may be perpetuated. The study addresses challenges faced by trans and non-binary individuals during the pandemic but recognizes that these issues need further research.

In this paper the term gender diverse is used to include transgender, gender non-conforming, non-binary, and intersex individuals. We use this term as an inclusive and respectful umbrella, one that can encompass a range of gender identities, including transgender, gender non-conforming, non-binary, and intersex individuals. We recognize, however, that individual preferences regarding terminology can vary and individuals within these groups may have specific preferences for how they are identified.

The term gender justice in this study is intentionally broad, encompassing all genders and ensuring legal and policy support extends to trans and non-binary individuals. The authors underscore the conceptualization of gender justice as recognizing differences among gender identities and challenging prevailing categories and definitions in research, media, and policy publications. The authors emphasize that gender justice extends beyond legal and policy considerations in recognizing and respecting the diversity inherent in various gender identities.

**The pandemic and gender inequality**

In March 2020, schools, universities, malls, markets, dine-in restaurants, salons, spas, gyms, massage parlours, theme parks, sports venues, conference halls, cinemas, and theatres all closed down. Thailand's tourism industry also came to a halt in April 2020, affecting millions of jobs around the country. A significant number of women were affected and lost their livelihoods, thus further increasing their economic disparity with men. More frequently than men, women stayed home and became the primary caregivers, and hence lost opportunities for income. Of those who kept their jobs, the wage gap for women in comparison to men increased from 2.5 per cent in 2015 to 10.94 per cent in 2020 as a result of COVID (UN Women 2022). The pandemic was worse for women in the informal sector, conflict-affected areas, and rural areas. Women migrants and ethnic groups were impacted the most from restrictions and income reduction. Some sectors suffered more than others: those with the fewest or weakest health and social insurance protections, including migrant workers, women in the informal sector, and workers in the tourism economy. The pandemic set back gains in gender equality as many women in the country suffered from significant gaps in access to resources during the pandemic.

The pandemic not only affected the economic and social life of women but seeped into the personal domain of women's lives. In the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the UN General Assembly recognized that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. Violence against women is considered a barrier to women's full participation in all spheres of life. During the pandemic, domestic violence cases rose in Thailand to such an extent that this phenomenon was labelled "Thailand's silent pandemic" (Langerak, 2020).

The prevalence of family violence in Thailand increased from 34.6 per cent in 2017 to 42.2 per cent in 2021 during the pandemic. In a study on the impacts of COVID-19 on family violence, staff members of a Thai organization working to eradicate domestic violence observed that domestic violence often occurred in families that faced loss of earnings (Napa, 2023). In a survey conducted by the researchers, 64.6 per cent of respondents cited being laid off by their employers as reason for their unemployment, while 21.9 per cent cited their businesses ceasing operations (Napa, 2023).



The loss of income or earning opportunities in turn led to high stress and, in keeping with long-standing patterns, the male family members took out their frustrations on women and sometimes children as well.

Lockdowns added to the suffering of women as they were unable to find safe spaces due to restrictions on movement and the closing of in-person services. While the pandemic magnified the gendered inequality faced

by women in the country, it also highlighted structural inequalities due to power imbalances and uneven distribution of wealth. These were especially visible in the policy responses of the government during the pandemic which were heavily reliant on social welfare rather than a robust gender-informed policy response. The Thai government fell back on existing social welfare programs rather than moving to formulate a pandemic specific (and gender-sensitive) response.

## Gender inequality in Thailand

---

While Thailand was one of the earliest countries to grant women voting rights in 1933, gender inequality remains deeply rooted in the social fabric of society. Despite a high percentage of women graduating from tertiary education, significant gendered patterns can be observed in the degrees obtained by women. Only one-third of the total of women graduates come from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), while two-thirds come from Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (World Economic Forum, 2022).

With women making up 60 per cent of the labour force, seeking gender justice in economic opportunities is critical in the work toward gender equality. This is not only important for women aspiring for equal economic rights but also for policy-making and efforts to ensure that women have adequate social protections. The pandemic showed how vulnerable certain sectors of the economy were, which left millions of women across the country out of work overnight. For economic gender equality to be realised, it is important that women enjoy opportunities to work in male-dominated industries with support and opportunities to advance. Kosaikanont (2019), however, observes that there appear to be no measures in place to address gender segregation in education and training in the labour market. The persistent gender wage gap between women and men increased during the pandemic and addressing it is an essential component to pursuing gender justice (Ketunuti and Chittangwong, 2020).

Women are traditionally seen as the caretakers of the family even when they are working full-time. During the pandemic, women disproportionately bore the burden of providing unpaid care and domestic work, with 26 per cent of young women reporting an increase in unpaid adult care (compared to 16 per cent of young men), and 41 per cent of young women reporting an increase in unpaid childcare (compared to 28 per cent of young men) (UN Women, 2020). Gender inequality further extends to the division of labour in the country. In 2021, women and girls over 15 made up 59 per cent of the labour force in Thailand (World Bank, 2021). For decades, women have been part of the supply of cheap, unskilled or semi-skilled labourers for the industrial and service sectors with little job security and hazardous working conditions. Women continue to be part of highly feminised industries with little protections and decision-making power and have been among the

first groups to lose their jobs when economic crises hit (Kosaikanont, 2019). According to Kosaikanont, the cultural values attached to certain industries are key drivers in who participates in which sectors of the economy. Hence construction, transportation, and communication remain male dominated while manufacturing, commerce, services, banking, and finances have high female participation.

Even with equality in education, women in Thailand continue to gravitate towards feminised vocations -- namely as teachers, nurses, and caregivers -- which pay less in the long run. These vocations are closely linked to the social and cultural standing of women and the norms that guide "proper" behavior in the country. Lapanaphan and Chinakkarapong (2020) note that the traditional Thai woman, "*Kulasatri Thai*" or "proper Thai lady," gets praised for characteristics such as being proficient and sophisticated in household obligations, graceful, pleasant, exhibiting modest manners and having conservative attitudes towards sexuality. While writers, scholars, and activists have sought to distance themselves from this ideal and establish more diverse models of womanhood, the construct of the "proper Thai lady" persists in influencing commonly held attitudes.

The prescribed gender roles and expectations of how women are and should behave remain one of the root causes of gender discrimination in the country. Changing cultural values and norms is not something that happens through legislation or policy alone: in many scenarios the most a state can do is guarantee non-discrimination and equality of opportunity to enable individuals to make of themselves what they will (Hawkesworth, 2019). Cultural change is a slow process and requires challenging established patterns of cultural value in the daily lives of people (Htun and Weldon, 2018). While many women in Thailand are speaking up for change, young men's perceptions and expectations of women and their gender roles also need to shift to achieve gender equality.

### Inequality and power

Inequality is enduring and systemic in Thailand and wealth is concentrated in the hands of 10 per cent of the population, who own 70-80 per cent of the total wealth in the country. Bleaker still, only one per cent of the population account for more than half of the

country's total wealth (Jitsuchon, 2020a). Thai structural inequality is caused by non-inclusive and highly skewed growth and continues to exacerbate gender inequality. Patriarchal values shore up policy decisions, public perception, hiring practices, and workplace culture in the private sector as well.

Political, economic, and social leadership is heavily, although not uniformly, concentrated in the hands of men (Lapanaphan and Chinakkarapong, 2020), thus limiting spaces where women can demand gender justice. Kevin Hewison (2015) analyzed the structural, social, political, and economic systems that maintain long-term inequality in the country. He argues that many factors help maintain inequality in the country, which extends beyond politics and law and permeates the very fabric of social relations. Kanchoochat in his analysis of the persistence of inequality, poverty, and low growth highlights Thailand's failure (compared to other Asian countries) to move people out of agriculture and to improve productivity (Kanchoochat, 2023). Recognizing that these structural obstacles in Thailand are both long-standing and political, his views are echoed by political economists such as Doner and Pasuk. Doner points to Thailand's "combined illiberal, oligarchic interests" that have helped steer the country toward growth with persistent inequality as a core attribute (Doner, 2023). Pasuk draws attention to factors such as the low rate of public investment in agriculture and challenges to land ownership, and wonders what can "disturb the dominant role of the traditional elite which seems quite happy to live with an inefficient agricultural sector, an inefficient state, and high inequality?" (Pasuk, 2023).

Inequality has been challenged by social and political movements and civil society organizations in Thailand by linking it to the need for democracy – a direct connection that became more visible and a galvanizing platform in Thai politics during the early 2000s. The Thai Rak Thai party, led by businessman-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra, promised a farmer debt moratorium, community-level soft loans, and universal health care, with the latter serving as the most significant legacy. Hewison notes how significant this was in Thailand's history: "For the first time, a political party promised – and delivered – programmatic and universal programs addressing poverty and welfare." Thaksin's government (2001-2006) was state-led in character, with profound populist–redistributive impacts (Kanchoochat and others, 2021). Despite the supposed commitment to structural change, neither of the country's two most recent military coups – 2006 and 2014 – brought about any significant

changes in the entrenched inequalities in Thailand. The junta that replaced Thaksin at the top of the pecking order merely rearranged the inner and outer circles of its own clientelistic networks. Thailand's nearly 20 years of social conflict has rendered the country's economic development "increasingly opposed to the notion of inclusive growth" (Kanchoochat and others, 2021).

According to the World Bank, in the aftermath of the 2014 coup and throughout the governments of General-turned-Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, Thailand actively lost ground on social gains made in the preceding decades. This backsliding coincides with "emerging and shifting economic and environmental challenges in the economy." The rise in inequality and increase in poverty paint a discouraging picture of the fruits of years of governance under the Prayut governments. Between 2015 and 2018, the poverty rate in Thailand grew from 7.21 per cent to 9.85 per cent and the absolute number of people living in poverty increased from 4.85 million to more than 6.7 million. Thailand's official poverty rate increased in 2016 and again in 2018. These were the fourth and fifth instances that official poverty rates increased since 1988, the previous three instances (1998, 2000, and 2008) occurring around the time of financial crises. Wage income also declined in urban households. Nationally, this signals a reversal in trends from the past. In the period 2007-2013, wages, farm incomes, and remittances contributed to poverty reduction, but in the period 2015-2017 they became sources of rising poverty (World Bank, 2020).

The military government and the political parties over which the military exerted great influence could not downplay inequality in the country altogether, and in fact sought to legitimize its plan to retain power for 20 years by insisting that under its control Thailand would be steered to "high-income country" status by the year 2034. Even a document drawn up in less than democratic conditions, the National Strategy (NSP) (2018-2037), acknowledges the problem of inequality: "Inequality is one of the key challenges impeding the country's sustainable development and development goal to become a high-income country in the next 20 years." The NSP further acknowledges that historically, Thailand has focused on economic development and viewed it as a measure of success, but this has not translated into equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. This is especially true for those in the remote areas of the country, with development highly concentrated in urban areas.

Revealingly, gender equality is not even a cross-cutting theme in the many aspects of the NSP. Rather, gender is treated as an afterthought and its significance is minimized. Gender only gains mention as one of the dimensions of work under the section “Social Cohesion and Equity.” This side-lining of gender reflects how few inroads have been made in gender mainstreaming in Thai policy-making more generally.

## Gender equality and policy-making

---

The concept of gender justice has proven challenging to implement in Thailand, especially regarding the inclusion of gender-diverse groups. Past and present policies reveal weak commitment to mainstreaming gender considerations, often relegating the gender dimension to a small corner of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

Over the past three decades, Thailand has aligned its gender equality agenda with the international women's rights agenda and for much of that time this has meant equality between cis-gender men and women. The country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985, accepting the optional protocol and individual complaints mechanism on 14 June 2000. Legal provisions were instituted to address gender inequalities through the enactment of legislation, policies, and programs. These measures include the Protection of Domestic Violence Victims Act (2007), the establishment of a dedicated 1300 hotline to combat violence against women by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (2013), the Gender Equality Act (2015), and the Women Development Strategy (2017-2021). Section 71 of the 2017 Constitution also emphasized gender budgeting, ensuring fairness by considering diverse necessities and needs (Government of Thailand, 2017). But progress in women's representation at policy-making levels has been slow (Mangkalanakul, 2021).

However, despite these initiatives, the policy-making environment and processes in Thailand lack sufficient support for the needs of women and gender-diverse individuals. Despite the introduction of gender-responsive budgeting in 2017 and the creation of the Gender Budgeting Action Plan with OECD assistance, little effort has been directed towards allocating funds for gender equality. This shortfall became particularly apparent during the pandemic when the government heavily relied on social protections, some ad-hoc, to address vulnerabilities. While these measures provided short-term relief for some Thais, they also fell far short where marginalized communities including trans people were concerned, a point taken up in the "Trans Resilience Report" conducted by the Asia Pacific Trans Network APTN (APTN, 2020).

A recent academic study emphasized the need to consider how policies promoting gender justice

address the social and political institutions responsible for constructing gender categories. (Phumessawatdi, 2019) However, hierarchical and concentrated power in Thailand impedes equal access to the policy-making process, limiting opportunities for broader human development across all areas. Despite the promises of the Thailand 4.0 policy, which aimed to address challenges keeping Thailand in its middle-income trap, it failed to adequately address the concentration of political and economic power and the persistent unequal entry to the policymaking process. This failure is anticipated to worsen the fragmented, two-tier nature of Thailand's political and economic system (Chiengkul, 2019).

While the Gender Equality Act added protection against "unfair gender discrimination," it has been criticized as "Thailand's Invisible Gender Law" due to its vagueness and weak implementation (Thai Enquirer, 2020). Human Rights Watch highlighted ongoing hurdles, such as the lack of a process for transgender people to obtain legal documentation reflecting their gender identity or expression (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Report submitted in November 2021, Thailand accepted country recommendations to advance gender equality (understood in this context to primarily mean equality between men and women), to combat discrimination and violence, and protect the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups (UNHRC, 2022).

### Social protections: benefits and limits

One of the main government responses during the pandemic was expanding social welfare schemes or protections. While the COVID-19 virus did not discriminate based on gender, it impacted gender differently and to varying degrees within the same gender. The need of the time was not whether men or women had equal opportunities, but rather whether women had the resources and safety nets to provide for their families without jobs, teach their children in the absence of schools, have access to healthcare, and means to secure work once the pandemic was over. Ever prevalent, gender inequality was exacerbated by the pandemic especially in widening the gender gap in economic opportunities and resources for women. Even apart from the added work of caregiving, many women were placed in precarious positions with limited access to government welfare schemes. For example,

during the pandemic, informal workers were provided with 5,000 Thai baht (US\$160) per month for three months. In total, 16 million workers making up to 45 per cent of the labour force benefited from this scheme. This assistance, however, was not made available to everyone: many women who were ethnic minorities and migrants without Thai nationality -- for example, in the Chiang Khon district of Chiang Rai province -- faced difficulties in accessing government support because they were not Thai nationals (UN Thailand, 2022).

Social protections are useful in times of extreme hardship such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Social Protections Floor (SPF) can potentially be very helpful in addressing major structural inequalities. An assessment using the SPF approach adopted by the International Labour Organization, whose recommendations were given to the Thai government in 2013, drew attention to the widespread need for strengthening and expanding protections in Thailand and the region. The recommendations highlighted the economic disparity between the rich and poor and the deprivation of the most basic rights to millions. The report noted a particular significance for women: "Globally, women are disproportionately represented amongst the poor and the vulnerable. The SPF, which aims at extending basic social protection to those who are currently excluded, has great potential to redress existing gender imbalances" (Schmitt and others, 2013, p. 28). While this is a hopeful view, it is also important to keep in mind that, in the Thai context, social protections granted to women may exclude certain groups depending on the social and cultural context.

Social protections can be framed in idioms of benevolence or claims and demands, depending on the government's political and ideological leanings. The most extensive protections were introduced by the government of Thaksin in the early 2000s, but after he was removed from power by a military coup in 2006, that history was downplayed. When the government approved the violent suppression of large-scale pro-democracy and pro-poor movements in the country in 2010, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's government reframed the idea of social protections so that its associations were free of any hint of increasingly partisan political struggles within Thai society that were spilling over to street protest: "Following the global economic crisis in 2008, the government's first stimulus package was successfully introduced that included the hand-out of income supplements to the elderly, the low income, and people with disabilities. Everyone is

now allowed to have access to medical treatments and services free of charge" (Public Relations Department of the Royal Thai Government, 2011). Thailand is proud of its reputation for having a more extensive protection system than other countries in the region, but the limits of these policies are evident as well, particularly in light of the continuous growth of inequality and the resurgence of poverty.

In recent times, democracy activists, prominent amidst the authoritarian landscape since 2014, have increasingly embraced the term "welfare" over "protections" in their pursuit of a more just society. Notably, those who emerged during the authoritarian climate following the 2014 coup emphasized the urgent need to address the escalating wealth inequality in the country. The Youth Democracy Movement, gaining prominence in 2020, explicitly linked the military and military-influenced governments to the widening socioeconomic gap between the affluent elite and the general population. This emphasis not only demonstrated the movement's commitment to challenging political authoritarianism but also showcased its dedication to advocating for comprehensive social and economic justice, embodying a holistic approach to democratization.

While advocacy for strengthening protections remains strong within policy-advising circles, the term "protections" tends to be confined to these circles. Conversely, "social welfare" has gained wider usage. In the lead-up to the 2023 elections, social welfare was incorporated into the party platform of the Move Forward Party. A Youth Study commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) for the years 2020-2021, focusing on Thais aged 14-35, revealed that the majority of Thai youth identify their political leaning as either liberal democratic or aligned with social democracy and welfare advocacy (Sawasdee and Domjun, 2022).

### Thailand's evolving political landscape

The electoral victory of Thailand's most progressive political party, Move Forward Party (MFP), in May 2023 was a strong repudiation of the previous military- and establishment-led governments. The MFP distinguished itself on many counts, including its youthful politicians and its determination to curtail the power of the military. Its bold platform of de-militarizing, de-monopolizing, and de-centralizing Thailand was a promise to strike at the heart of the concentration of wealth and power in the country. The concentration of wealth and power is closely interlinked with gender inequality and



discrimination and the MFP's resounding victory at the polls signified an important shift in public opinion on key policy issues. The party's commitment to reforming the country's defamation law, Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, however, proved to be too much of a threat to the Thai cultural and political status quo and the MFP was blocked from forming a government later in 2023. Nonetheless, their victory represented a dramatic break from political tradition and cultural norms.

The patchwork coalition that was put together to form a government midway through 2023 is not likely to last a full four years. The political environment will not likely revert to the repressive and anti-democracy climate of the 2014–2023 period. Politically and economically, Thailand remains in the grips of the “traditional elite,” meaning the military, parts of the bureaucracy, and politically connected businesspeople (Pasuk, 2022). Culturally and socially, however, the country's future is much more up for grabs. Given the political leadership which took the reins of government and side-lined the MFP, frustration will resurface.

### Advancing the gender justice agenda and challenges

This paper has discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic magnified existing gender inequality suggesting that mainstreaming gender equality in Thailand still faces many obstacles and noted the challenges to making the concept of gender justice more inclusive. The pandemic emphasised how the burden of care is determined by gender roles. The pandemic also highlighted the minimal protections available to women and how so many were left unprotected when the pandemic struck. The lack of political impetus has left the work of calling for gender justice to Thai civil society organizations, most of which are women rights organizations and coalitions. These organizations have worked tirelessly and found some success in an uncertain political climate. In a 2021 success, advocacy by the Women Workers Unity Group resulted in change in the Criminal Code Thailand provisions pertaining to elective abortions, changing the law to permit elective abortions from 12 weeks to up to 20 weeks. While this legal change was notable, health care advocates draw attention to how Thailand remains in need of more healthcare units capable of providing abortions beyond 12 weeks.

The promotion of a gender justice agenda suffers when it gets conflated with feminism, either as a concept about which many people have a general (and

sometimes rather superficial) understanding or when the term is attached to organizations and groups promoting women-focused equality goals. There are numerous organizations across Thailand which do not necessarily identify themselves primarily as feminist organizations but are working towards progress in women's rights (Prachathai, 2022). This distinction is important to understand in Thailand's context because of divided agendas within the women right's movements.

Traditional socio-cultural beliefs are evolving in Thailand, though the binary view of gender is still prevalent. People whose gender identities do not fit into the heteronormative cultural practices in the country face many forms of discrimination. The omission of rights advocacy for groups such as trans women, for example, leaves them unable to legally change the titles on their identity papers even after a gender affirmation surgery. Marriage is solemnized between males and females, denying civil rights for same-sex couples, whose rights have not significantly advanced even after passing the Gender Equality Act (Prachathai, 2022). A 2019 UNDP study concluded that there are overall favourable attitudes towards LGBTQI people in Thailand and significant support for inclusive laws and policies, but also persistent experiences of stigma and discrimination, violence and exclusion. The Asia Pacific Transgender Network noted that while the pandemic had impacted everyone, it had put vulnerable groups such as the LGBTI at greater risk given the difficulties they faced accessing resources (Bangkok Post, 2021).

The premise of the gender justice agenda is that people of all genders should have access to equal resources and opportunities. The inherent inequality, political uncertainty, and differences in understanding of gender equality all continue to pose a challenge for advancing a singular agenda. Despite all the challenges, crucial work in advancing the agenda is being undertaken by youth activists and the next generation. The feminist movement in Thailand spans generations but the historic democracy movement that coalesced in 2020 revealed that younger Thais view social, cultural, and political changes as inextricably bound. There are generational shifts in organizing decentralized movements, instead of being institutionally bound or relying on public demonstrations or activities. Younger generations are also maximising the use of social media and technology to advance the demand for rights. The use of internet technology sky-rocketed during the pandemic and worked to the advantage of the new generation. The

new generation is also using their creativity to their advantage. With the patriarchal structure squeezing them to the edges of society, they have become one of the most creative groups in expressing their identity and waging defiance (Prachathai, 2022).

The younger generation of activists is also different from seasoned activists because they are not afraid

to call out the transgressions and intimidation tactics that are used to silence women, such as those used during the pro-democracy protests. Prachathai (2022) reported that threats against women could be seen on both online and offline platforms and cases of sexual violence against women and gender diverse people increased. It is within these spaces where the gender justice agenda in Thailand can be supported.



# Conclusion and Recommendations for advancing gender justice post-COVID

---

The advancement of gender justice in Thailand needs a holistic strategy, one that weaves together grassroots and policy-level initiatives. Educational curricula should integrate discussions on gender roles, accompanied by scholarships that would make it possible for women and gender-diverse individuals to enter fields traditionally dominated by men. Locally driven, feminist-aligned research has great potential to inform policy-making. Strengthening opportunities for civil society organizations to engage in policy dialogues is crucial to this. Ensuring gender-responsive and accessible protections will continue to be extremely important. Using a gender lens and integrating lessons learned from the pandemic, an evaluation of protection policies will yield new insights. The expansion of the gender justice movement requires inclusivity, with strengthened spaces for gender and sexually-diverse groups, increased youth representation, and active participation of men in dialogues for a more comprehensive and effective approach. This multifaceted strategy can help to achieve enduring gender justice in Thailand.

## Recommendation 1: Addressing gender inequality

### *At the grassroots level*

- Discuss gender, gender diversity, gender-related issues, including gender roles in caregiving, within the educational curriculum
- Encourage women and gender diverse persons through scholarships and grants to pursue higher education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine, so these groups can become visible in these fields usually pursued by men in the country.
- Create targeted public education campaigns through social media to start or strengthen dialogues about gender equality.
- Invest in feminist-aligned, gender-focused research, particularly by local researchers to advance gender equality aims and influence policy.

### *At policy level*

- Ensure all laws, regulations and policies are in accordance with the non-discrimination prescribed by the Gender Equality Act.
- Review the progress of the Gender Equality Act to assess the achievements and challenges in fostering

gender equality in the country.

- Raise awareness and build capacity through education and training of civil servants and government ministries.
- Strengthen opportunities for civil society organizations to participate in policy dialogue.
- Allocate budget and resources for program, services, and organizations working towards gender equality
- Review the capacity of current institutions for implementing programs for gender equality
- Raise the profile of the term gender justice within Thai policy circles and elaborate more concretely on how to integrate and link it to the opportunities that remain so unequally distributed among different groups in the country but would be a great change from the present policy environment

## Recommendation 2: Gender-responsive accessible protections

- In light of the pandemic and how it affected genders differently, such as differences in burden of caregiving due to defined gender roles, evaluate current protection policies through a gendered lens.
- Learn from lessons from the pandemic, ensure expanded protections are available to the most marginalized groups like groups in the informal economies especially during emergencies.
- Ensure protections are accessible in times of need and minimize barriers, such as using complicated applications for registration or long-distance travel to physical centres, especially for those residing in rural communities.
- Organize collaborations with local grassroots organizations, which can be mobilized in times of emergencies and may be one of the ways that the government can reduce the pressure on it to act immediately.

## Recommendation 3: Expanding the gender justice movement:

- Strengthen spaces for inclusion of gender diverse groups in the mainstream advocacy of rights.
- Encourage representation and participation of youth advocates, who have the knowledge and capacity of modernizing the movement.

- Scope for opportunities for inclusion of men in dialogue as advancing the gender justice movement cannot happen in a bubble.
- Challenge existing norms and definitions prevalent in research, media, and policy publications. Support policy discussions and advocacy research that goes beyond a binary framework to ensure that legal and policy changes support and protect the rights of trans and non-binary individuals

## References

---

- Asia Pacific Transgender Network (2021). "Stories of Hope, Pain, and Survival from the Trans Movement During the COVID-19 Pandemic". Available at <https://www.aidsdatahub.org/resource/trans-resilience-report-stories-hope-pain-and-survival-trans-movement-during-covid-19>.
- Bohwongprasert, Y. (2021). "Being Trans in a Pandemic". Bangkok Post. Available at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/2052739/being-trans-in-a-pandemic>.
- Buranajaroenkij, D. (2017). Political Feminism and the Women's Movement in Thailand: Actors, Debates and Strategies. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/thailand/13363.pdf>.
- Chiangkul, P. (2019). Uneven Development, Inequality and Concentration of Power: A Critique of Thailand 4.0. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(9), 1689–1707.
- Government of Thailand. (2017). Thailand's Constitution of 2017. Available at [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand\\_2017.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en).
- Government of Thailand. (2019). National Strategy Plan 2018-2037 (Unofficial Translation). Available at <http://nsc.nesdb.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/National-Strategy-Eng-Final-25-OCT-2019.pdf>.
- Hawkesworth, M. (2019). Political Worlds of Women: Activism, Advocacy, and Governance in the Twenty-First Century. New York: Routledge.
- Hewison, K. (2015). Inequality and Politics in Thailand. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17. Available at <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-17/inequality-and-politics-in-thailand-2/>.
- Htun, M. and Weldon, L. S. (2018). The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights Around the World (Cambridge Studies in Gender and Politics). Cambridge University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2015). Thailand's Gender Equality Act. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/thailand-gender-equality-act>.
- Human Rights Watch (2021). People can't fit be into boxes: Thailand's need for legal gender recognition. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/12/15/people-cant-be-fit-boxes/thailands-need-legal-gender-recognition>.
- Jatupitpornchan, P., Thirachiwanon, T., and Kaewbuadee, N. (2022). TDRI Quarterly Review (December 2021). Thailand Development Research Institute. Available at <https://tdri.or.th/en/2022/03/tdri-quarterly-review-december-2021/>.
- Jitsuchon, S. (2020a, 20 January). Thai Inequality: What We Should Know. TDRI: Thailand Development Research Institute. Available at <https://tdri.or.th/en/2020/01/thai-inequality-what-we-should-know/>.
- Jitsuchon, S. (2020b, 14 February). Thai Inequality 2020: What We Should Do. TDRI: Thailand Development Research Institute. Available at <https://tdri.or.th/en/2020/02/thai-inequality-2020-what-we-should-do/>.
- Jitsuchon, S., and Sumano, B. (2021). Toward Universal Welfare System: Leaving No One Behind. Thailand Development Research Institute. Available at <https://tdri.or.th/en/2021/12/toward-universal-welfare-system-leaving-no-one-behind/>.
- Kanchoochat, V., Aiyara, T., and Ngamarunchot, B. (2021). Sick Tiger: Social Conflict, State– Business Relations and Exclusive Growth in Thailand. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 51(5), 737–758.
- Kanchoochat, V. (2023). "Siamese Twin Failures: Structural and Regulatory Transformations in Unequal Thailand". *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 18, (1), 47-68.

- Ketunuti, V. and Chittangwong, S. (2020). Against the Odds: Stories from Women in Thailand During COVID-19. 26 June. Available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/06/against-the-odds-stories-from-women-in-thailand-during-covid19>.
- Kosaikanont, R. (2019). Gender and the Future of Work in Thailand. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at <https://asia.fes.de/news/gender-and-the-future-of-work-in-thailand>.
- Langerak, A. (2020). Thailand's Silent Pandemic: Domestic Violence during COVID-19. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. Available at <https://th.boell.org/en/2020/07/01/covid-19-domestic-violence>.
- Lapanaphan, T. and Chinakkarapong, S. (2020). Critical Feminist Analysis: Gender Construction, Impacts and Perception of Thai Women. *Social Science Asia*, 6(1), 27–42.
- Mackie, V. C. (2013). Introduction: ways of knowing about human rights in Asia. *Asian Studies Review*, 37 (3), 293-301.
- Mangklatanakul, V. (2021). Filling in Legal Gaps to Promote Women's Empowerment Under International Commitments: Thailand's Case Studies. In *Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a Post COVID-19 World*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thailand. Available at <https://treaties.mfa.go.th/pdf/women%20empowerment%20article.pdf>.
- Napa, W., Neelapaichit, N., Kongsakon, R. et al. (2023). Impacts of COVID-19 on Family Violence in Thailand: Prevalence and Influencing Factors. *BMC Women's Health* 23, 294 (2023).
- OXFAM (2023). Gender Justice and Women's Rights. Available at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/issues/gender-justice-and-womens-rights>.
- Paitoonpong, S., Phacharawadee, T., and Waisuriya, P. (2016). Social Protection System in Thailand: An Overview. *TRDI Quarterly Review*, 31(4), 2–15.
- Phongpaichit, P. (2023). Comment on "Siamese Twin Failures: Structural and Regulatory Transformations in Unequal Thailand". *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 18, (1), 69-70.
- Phongpaichit, P. & Baker, C. (2015). *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth, and Power*. NUS Press.
- Phumessawatdi, P. (2019). Policy Movement Through the Lens of Postcolonial Feminism, Policy Transfer, and Policy Translation: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming in Thailand. [PhD Dissertation]. University of Bristol.
- Prachathai (2022). Women, Feminists, and LGBTQ+ in the Thai Protests. Prachathai English. Available at <https://prachatai.com/english/node/9640#5.1.1>.
- Sawasdee and Domjun (2022). FES Youth Study Thailand, 2021-2022. Available at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/thailand/20086.pdf>.
- Schmitt, V., Sakunphanit, T., and Prasitsiriphol, O. (2013). Social Protection Assessment-based National Dialogue: Towards a Nationally-defined Social Protection Floor in Thailand. International Labour Organization. Available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---soc\\_sec/documents/publication/wcms\\_213264.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_213264.pdf).
- Songsamphan, C. (2011). Localizing Feminism: Women's Voices and Social Activism in Thai Context. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 9 March. Available at <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2011/03/09/localizing-feminism-women%E2%80%99s-voices-and-social-activism-thai-context>.
- Sumano, B. and Aneksomboonphon, N. (2021). 16 Days: Just Say No to Sexual Violence. Thailand Development Research Institute. Available at <https://tdri.or.th/en/2021/12/16-days-just-say-no-to-sexual-violence/>.

- Teeratanabodee, W. (2021). Feminism and the Pro-Democracy Cause in Thailand. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-94-feminism-and-the-pro-democracy-cause-in-thailand-by-wichuta-teeratanabodee/>.
- Thai Enquirer (2020). Thailand's Gender Equality Act Five Years On. Thai Enquirer, 29 December. Available at <https://www.thaienquirer.com/22048/thailands-gender-equality-act-five-years-on/>.
- Public Relations Department of the Royal Government of Thailand (2011). Ensuring Appropriate Social Protection for Thai People. Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore. Available at [https://www.thaiembassy.sg/press\\_media/news-highlights/ensuring-appropriate-social-protection-for-thai-people](https://www.thaiembassy.sg/press_media/news-highlights/ensuring-appropriate-social-protection-for-thai-people).
- United Nations (2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. 09 April. Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Policy-Brief-on-COVID-Impact-on-Women.pdf>.
- United Nations Development Program and The Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development (2018) Legal Gender Recognition in Thailand: A Legal and Policy Review. Available at <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/th/legal-gender-recognition-in-thailand-2018.pdf>.
- United Nations (2022). The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/>.
- United Nations Human Rights Council. (2021). Universal Periodic Review - Thailand. In Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/th-index>.
- UNICEF (2020). Can Social Protections be a Driver of Gender Equality? Available at <https://www.unicef-irc.org/evidence-for-action/can-social-protection-be-a-driver-of-gender-equality/>.
- UN Women (2020). Data Snapshot. Available at <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/economicempowermentindianoc/eas/en/thailand.html>.
- UN Women (2022). The State of Women's Economic Empowerment in the Indian Ocean Rim: Country Snapshot-Thailand. UN Women. Available at <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/economicempowermentindianoc/eas/en/thailand.html>.
- World Bank (2021). Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - Thailand | Data. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=TH>.
- World Economic Forum (2022). Global Gender Gap Report, July. Available at: [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2022.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf).
- Yeoh, L. (2022). Feminist Intervention and Emerging Issues in Southeast Asia. Available at <https://th.boell.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/feminist-covid-sea-final.pdf>.





## About the author

**Coeli Barry**, PhD, teaches at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, and is adviser to the Cultural Rights Forum of the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok.

## Imprint

© 2023 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Nepal Office | Regional Gender Justice Project  
Lalitpur Metropolitan City, Ward 2, Sanepa  
P.O. Box 11840  
Kathmandu, Nepal

Responsible: **Natalia Figge** | Project Director

 <https://asia.fes.de/>

 FESinAsia

 @FESinAsia

To order publication: [geha@fes.de](mailto:geha@fes.de)

Commercial use of all media published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

The Regional Gender Justice Project coordinates FES' work on gender justice in the Asia and Pacific region. Together with colleagues, feminists, and partners in the region we create spaces for exchange and mutual learning and develop transformative strategies for a more gender just future.

[asia.fes.de](https://asia.fes.de)