WOMEN AND COMMUNITY RADIO IN THAILAND

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After the constitution of Thailand 1997 was declared, people's media reform organizations (PMROs) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have tried to reform the media. Community radio (CR) is the best concrete example of media reform in Thailand, because radio is a medium that is highly accessible in rural areas, and involves low production costs and levels of necessary expertise. Additionally, NGOs and PMROs have supported communities establishing community radio. Thus, at the beginning of the 2000s, community radio has emerged in Thailand.

In 2002, there were over 100 stations. But in 2004, after the government allowed community radio to run commercials not more than six minutes per hour, it has led to soaring interest and more than 3,000 community radio stations have been founded. And in 2010, when the Subcommittee on Radio and Television Broadcasting under the National Telecommunication Commission (NTC) started to invite the applications for community radio licenses, it turned out that more than 6,000 applications have been filed. At present, an estimate goes that there are around 8,000 stations claiming themselves to operate as community radio stations.

Since 2007, the Multiculturalism and Educational Policy Research Centre (Multi-Ed), Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai University is interested in women's programs and in the number of woman broadcasters. Therefore, Multi-Ed has developed short-term projects for “empowering woman in community radio and investigating the role of woman in community radio”. The projects were funded by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Southeast Asia.

This paper would like to explain the role of women in community radio in Thailand in terms of community radio as a public space for women, women and CR technology, and women programs in the community radio.

Thai Political context

The operation of community radio in Thailand does not run smoothly. This is because of a conflict brought about by unclear law. The operation of community radio, under Article 40 of the 1997 Constitution, is fiercely opposed by governmental officials who think that this matter falls under the “Television and Radio Operation Act” passed by parliament, and that community radio stations cannot broadcast legally.

On January 2005, the Public Relations Department declared that there were 3,000 community radio stations all over Thailand, both registered and non-registered. One third of these stations are operated by entertainment entrepreneurs and the rest are operated by local politicians, local businesses, temples, Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAOs), universities and others. Fewer than 10 percent of community radio stations

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1 Researchers of Multiculturalism and Educational Policy Research Centre (Multi-Ed), Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai University. (www.multied.org)
2 The objective of Article 40 of the 1997 constitution is to reallocate radio frequencies, which used to be wholly state-owned and state-managed, to the wider public.
practiced or identified themselves with the idea that “community radio belongs to the community and is operated by the community for the community as non-profit organizations, and free from intervention by the state, capital, and politicians”.³

In 2006, the Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy (CDRM) committed a coup and repealed the 1997 Constitution. The new 2007 Constitution was later drafted and referendum on it was held. As a result of the new Constitution becoming effective, two Acts had to be amended. They were the National Broadcast and Television Control Act declared in 2008 and the Act on Organization for Allocating Broadcasting Frequency and Supervising Radio/Television Broadcasting and Telecommunication Businesses, B.E. 2553 (2010).

The Transitional Provision of the National Broadcast and Television Control Act provides that the NTC shall undertake its duties provisionally and the Subcommittee on Radio and Television Broadcasting shall be established to provide its opinions and to act on the assignments set out by the NTC. Later in 2009, the procedure and announcement were made to community radio stations to apply for temporary licenses. More than 6,000 stations expressed their interest and more 800 stations applied for the licenses. The interested and applying radio stations were varied. Some stations were established clearly for a commercial purpose, some for supporting certain political ideologies, and some based on the concept of “by, for and of the community”, with more than 100 stations in the latter category.

Until now (December 2010), none of the applying community radio stations have been awarded the licenses. This stems from a disagreement as to the procedure to issue the licenses between the Secretariat of the Subcommittee and the NTC. As a result, the operation of community radio has not been legalized yet.

In addition, it will take almost one year to complete the selection process and the appointment of the new National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission. Therefore, the problem of parasitic/out-of-band emission of frequencies and the “war of increasing transmission power” will continue unabated since there are no official guidelines to which the operators of public radio, business radio and community radio have to adhere, and there is no competent agency to directly review and approve the licenses of each kind of radio stations (public radio, business radio, and community radio) and to be in charge of the overall allocation and supervision of the use of frequencies. That the Subcommittee may issue temporary licenses to community radio stations alone does not help to stem the problems of parasitic/out-of-band emission of frequencies.

As for the intervention of the state, in April 2010, the Red Shirts converged to protest against the Abhisit-led coalition and used community radio to disseminate their political views and broadcast their no-confidence debate outside the parliament. Since then, the Abhisit government has declared a state of emergency and called a meeting of all community radio operators to ask them to stop disseminating information and news from the Red Shirts and just to feature news put out by the government. Later more than 47 community radio stations in 13 provinces have been shut down and 49 persons involved with the community radio stations have been either issued with arrest warrants or prosecuted. It is a deliberate attempt to stop the operation of radio stations which feature political views and criticisms against the government. People involved have been

arrested and prosecuted and their equipment has been seized invoking the charge of being in possession of and using transmission devices and setting up broadcasting stations without licenses as per the Radio Broadcasting Act BE 2498 (1955), even though most of the busted stations have applied for temporary licenses and should be entitled to broadcasting protection by the NTC. Nevertheless, such an official arrangement cannot be invoked to prevent the arrest and shutdown of the CR stations (Suthep Wilailert, 2010)

Social-cultural context

Though socially and culturally, women have been increasingly accepted to get involved in the “public sphere”, their duties to tend to their “domestic sphere” including tending to the motherly and wifely roles are still expected and given the first priority. Thus, a number of women are unable to work in the “public sphere”. In other words, women are expected to perform their domestic roles well first - including child rearing, house cleaning, washing, etc. - before they are allowed to dedicate themselves to a public cause, whereas men are not bound by the domestic chores and thus are free to work for public interest. As a result, there are less women than men in the “public sphere”, particularly at the policy and decision making level.

Considering gender balance in the operation of community radio in Thailand, it should be noted that the last two National Telecommunication Commissions (NTC) contained no women among their seven members. Of the 15 members of the National Federation of Community Radio’s board, only one is a woman. Among the community radio stations, only 12.9 percent of them are managed under the directorship of women, whereas men control 87.1 percent of the stations. Among active community radio station boards, on average out of about 11 persons per station, eight of them (73 percent) are men, and three women (27 percent). And of all active announcers, out of an average of about ten for each station, six of them (60 percent) are men, and four women (40 percent).

These data should explain how the community radio sphere is largely dominated by men. It does not just stem from the notion that the operation of community radio is technologically oriented and it is more proper for men to be involved, but the acceptance in the local community to “have women get involved as directors of the stations” is minimal. Asking how women can play a role in community radio stations, responses from the in-depth survey range from cleaning the station (mopping, sweeping the floor), being secretary in the board.

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4 Summarized from the survey of 62 community radio stations by the National Federation of Community Radio, for more detail, please see Sarintip Mansap (2010), “Truths about community radio” ความ (ป็น) จริงวิทยุชุมชน “2010, Multiculturalism and Educational Policy Research Centre, Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai University

5 The gender balance in mainstream media is not so different. In 2006, 38% of those issued with ID cards by the Public Relations Department were women. In 2005, only 12% of the persons in charge including editors/publishers/directors were women (for more detail, please see Bureau of Women’s and Family Institution’s Affairs, the 2008 Thai Women Status Report)
meeting, being treasurer of the station, etc., most of the roles are traditionally assigned
to women.

In addition, the operation of community radio has to rely on knowledge from outside the
community and it seems men are more familiar with this (technology and the like). Also,
the station management requires social networking and support from a range of people
including technicians to maintain the computer, and men tend to be more familiar with
such networks. Thus, few women in the community have effective access to the
“decision making space”.

**Gender Blind in Community Radio Participation**

Community radio is a media, which depends upon technical knowledge. Generally,
technology has long been believed to be gender neutral. In fact, technology and media is
primarily a male domain (Kuga Thas.et.al, 2007: 3). Therefore, it is no surprise that there
is gender blindness in community radio. When using community radio as a development
tool without gender perspective, it creates unequal participation and benefit between
man and woman.

Several community radio studies in Thailand find that more than half of the listeners are
women (Weerapong 2007: 135). Poonsombat’s study (2009: 16) shows that women play
an important role on community radio development. They actively call on and ask for
favorite song from broadcasters, talk with broadcasters friendly, suggest or feed back the
program, bring food or gift or snack to broadcasters. Moreover, women donate their own
money for the CR operation, and play an important role on CR fund rising.

Furthermore, women also participate in community radio as broadcasters. A preliminary
study of community radio in Thailand shows that the average number of broadcasters at
each community radio station is 14 persons, of whom there are typically five women and
nine men (Sarod, 2008: 140-141). The large number of woman listeners could not shift to
be broadcaster because of the technological obstacles.6

To be a broadcaster is the participation in production level, and can voice for its own
sake. Anyway, being broadcaster needs some skills, especially CR technology skill.
When operating the empowering woman in community radio project, the number of
woman broadcasters and woman programs are increased after 2 workshops because
they learn CR technology skill, broadcasting skill, program producing skill, etc. (Sarintip,
2008).

Woman participation in community radio is not only listener and broadcaster, but also
treasurer and operational committee in decision making level (Poonsombat, 2009: 17).
But the number of women in decision level is still low. Anyway, this reflects the trend of
equal access and control on community radio between men and women in the future.

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6 According to a survey of the project on Empowering Woman in Community Radio in 2008, 57%
of female broadcasters or who were interested to be broadcaster needed CR technology
training course, and 67% never attended any broadcaster training course.
The obstacles for women to engage in community radio

There are several factors negatively affecting the participation of women in community radio activities: 1) Economic factor, the poor cannot participate in public work as a volunteer because they have to work for their living; 2) Cultural factor, the marginal and woman groups are impeded on some spheres and roles; and 3) Community radio factor, the regular time of broadcasting demands the broadcaster’s work as a routine job.

1. The operation without a gender perspective.
When looking at a community as a homogenous-solidarity one, one does not realize that there are diverse conflicts in a community. When one social group participates in CR operation, it may impede another social group implicitly. Man groups, who set up CR stations and learn how to operate CR, unintentionally impede woman, who do not have the experience and still have “computer-phobia”, accessing to CR.

Furthermore, CR operation inseparably involves communication technology. Anyway, technology has long been believed to be complex, hard to learn, and far from daily life so that it is an obstacle for woman accessing to CR. Additionally, the beginning of CR operation ignores digital divide between rural and urban so that CR operators intended and unintended neglect technological obstacles. The CR technology is a great obstacle for “villagers” who do not study in formal education system, especially the old woman, ethnic group, and local scholar.

Even there is a preparation process for establishing CR and activating “representative of every sector” participating in CR operation, women are still neglected practically. The CR committee actively comes to work at the first period but presently some of them leave.

If there is a gender analysis at the beginning, one will find that CR technology and CR as a public sphere are the greatest obstacles for woman. Decreasing these obstacles needs a suitable empowering process for woman and other inferior groups. And CR policy has to include special programs such as woman programs, children programs, and the disabled programs.

In rural CR, the great obstacle of woman participating in CR operation is “community culture determinism”. There are several issues as follow:

- “Public sphere” in community radio: some women dare not participate in community radio because they do not want to enter the public sphere. They still prefer to live in “domestic sphere”. When asking rural women why they do not participate in community radio, the answer is that “I'm shame.” Or “I do not want to be well-known”. Nowadays there are some women entering “public sphere”, but the large number of woman, especially women in rural areas, is socialized to live in domestic sphere as comfort zone (Sarod, 2008B: 8). This familiar domestic sphere leads to the myth of women themselves and the other so that they lay down women’s role as a “listener and supporter” of community radio. Even several researches in Thailand find that most women in communities play these roles in community radio operation; they do not

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7 Public sphere in this paper means the sphere oppose to domestic sphere. Community radio is a public sphere. It gives woman an opportunity for rising “her voice” or woman issue to the public. It is a space for exchanging and finding out the resolution of woman problem. See details in www.javnost-thepublic.org, Mitchell, Caroline. (1998), Women’s (Community) Radio as A Feminist Public Sphere, The Public, Vol.5 (1998), 2.
question this phenomenon. It seems that they emphasize the stereotyped role of women in the society.

- **Women can not learn computer (or technology), or technology is male domain:** This is a myth. If one truly understands gender difference and CR technology, one will know that women as well as the inferior can learn CR technology. But one has to design special course for them by concerning on long regular training and location of training, etc. (Sarod, 2008 B).

- **The myth of women personality:** most of women like to talk insinuatingly, and do not express her idea to the public. This negative myth evokes most of women can not participate as broadcasters and CR committee. In fact, there are several researches find that both men and women can have these negative personalities so that it should not use this myth obstructed women.

### Community Radio as a Public Space for Women

In general, community radio broadcasters do not put more emphasis on news and useful information but rather communicate on events within community. Therefore, it is difficult for them to use community radio as public space for exchanging information, discussing public issues and finding resolutions of problems. However, when considering community radio as public space (as opposed to domestic space) for woman, it is relevant that women participate in community radio not only as broadcasters, but also as committee members and fund raisers. Moreover, there are woman heads of community radio stations.

The woman broadcasters in CR can be divided into two groups: radio programming oriented to women’s issues and programming not oriented to women’s issues. One may conclude that community radio has been an extension of the public sphere for women. Woman broadcasters, who are ordinary people – housewives, tradeswomen, employees, government officials, students etc. – can exercise their potential as communicators by talking about community events, creating entertainment, and expressing their opinions within a volunteer ethos.

Even though the woman broadcasters face several hurdles – age, knowledge of technology, and femininity – they have the potential to be good broadcasters. Moreover, community radio space is not only a women’s public space that allows a woman to get out of her home, talking about public issues and exchanging her experience with other woman; this public space also gives an opportunity for empowering other potentials.

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• **Space for Learning (Reading and Writing):** Community radio is a space for distributing information to listeners and society. From the experience of the project, community radio is a kind of classroom for every woman broadcaster coming to share her experiences.

• **Space for Exchanging Experience of Technology:** A community radio broadcaster not only prepares the issues, content, and mode of speaking for presentation in radio programs, but also operates the instruments in the broadcasting room. The controls may be difficult for them even though the technology is not very complex.

• **Domestic Space in Public Space:** The struggle over the domestic space and public space of woman, historically, has positioned woman in domestic space. Drawing on feminist critique – “the personal is political” – there is a re-organizing of social space all over the world. Women’s issues that always occupied domestic space can speak in public space.9

• **Space for Changing Identity:** In the space of community radio, a woman broadcaster changes her identity unconsciously. Her identity is changed from vendor, housewife, elder, nurse, National Park official, or teacher to be a “communicator for social change” in the community.

**Women and CR Technology**

Practitioners of rural development in Thailand dealing with technology transfer are scarcely aware that the social construction of women’s roles limits their access to, and control of, technology; men have more access and control than women. Many supporters of development have, moreover, seen the action of transferring technology as being gender neutral; men and women can equally access and utilize this.10 And a technology transfer course which is good for a man is good for a woman as well.11 Furthermore, even when one understands men’s and women’s roles in a rural community, one rarely relates technological transfer courses to the issue of differentiation among woman; such as economic class, age, experience, need, education, ethnicity, etc.12 The differentiation of men and women and, among women, the social construction of gender, should be considered as factors when designing a technological transfer course for rural development.

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Broadcasting instruments – for example, CD players, mixers, computers, transmitters, etc. – constitute a new technology which a villager has to learn if he/she wants to produce community radio programs. The task of teaching and transferring technology for empowering the marginalized and voiceless is incurred by community radio broadcasters as well as external related agencies.

Most community radio empowerment training projects are not concerned with man-woman differentiation. The involved agencies and practitioners may think that there is no difference in technological learning among men and women. Therefore they allow men and women to attend the same training courses, and to learn together. Moreover, the training emphasis is more on broadcasting design, and less on community radio technology, so that the community radio broadcasters are left to learn how to use instruments in the broadcasting room from each other.

Woman Contents in the Community Radio

The diversity of the contents varies according to each broadcaster. At its inception, many people in the community want to get involved as broadcasters. But as there have been more business “local radio” stations, some broadcasters from the community radio have moved to work in those local radio stations. With the dwindling number of community radio broadcasters, the diversity of the contents becomes less. During the hours no broadcasters are assigned, stations have to turn on music or link to programs from other stations.

In addition, most of the community radio programs are live broadcasts and a combination of entertainment and news. The primary method used is more or less “news informing” or “one way communication” rather than seeking interaction from the audience. The contents cover news about events in the community (funeral services, wedding ceremonies, traditional activities, etc.) and those outside the community (news feed from the government and other private sector, information from magazines, newspapers or websites deemed useful for the audience).

Based on the survey of the community radio status in 2010, 41.5 percent of the community radio features programs for women. Based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, though 40 percent of the broadcasters of community radio are women, most of them tend to run the programs targeting a general audience. Most of the “women’s programs” are supposed to cover issues such as beauty, personal health and family, in-trend fashion, etc., but there are no issues such as rights and liberties, problems and solutions for women or “women’s perspectives” on arising social problems.
Conclusion

Women can be directors, broadcasters, and listeners in community radio sphere. Because most women prefer to live in “private sphere” and are culturally impeded on some spheres and roles so that the number of women in decision making level (director and CR committee) is still low. Moreover, though 40 percent of the broadcasters of community radio are women, most of them tend to run the programs targeting a general audience.

Anyway the space of community radio can be a place for empowering women. Community radio itself has to be studied in relation to many issues, such as information technology, skills, concepts, etc. These issues can be politicized in a movement on the social status of women. But there is no movement for women’s empowerment in community radio in Thailand because most of CR operators are not concerned with “women’s issues in the space of community radio.”

Therefore, if one does not ask about the gender issue when one designs the project, one does not have gender sensitivity in the project. However, women’s spaces in community radio can be increased through the process of participation. It not only increases women’s technical abilities, but also improves their radio programs and allows various “meanings” to be defined on air. This expresses women’s potentials in a way that goes beyond the ideology of femininity.
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