

## UNREPORTED FEMINIST ISSUES IN THAILANDS SOUTHERN UNIREST

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### Abstract

*This study aims to examine unreported issues on feminist in Thailand's southern unrest, and to explore their newsworthiness. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions of groups of academic experts, NGOs staffs, stringers and local news reporters, victims of the ongoing unrest, and youths in the area were conducted over a period of five months, starting from October 2010 to February 2011. This is to provide the data on what characteristics of information and stories relating to feminist that the key informants consider worth reporting during the crisis. The findings reveal that twelve unreported topics on feminists include (1) continuous aids and compensation for female victims, (2) ways to cope with the crisis, (3) government policy and solutions affecting females, (4) transformation of women's roles, (5) female participation in resolving problems and peace-building, (6) women's attitudes towards the southern unrest and possible ways out, (7) women's rights and roles in Islam, (8) women rights and gender equality, (9) women and education, (10) women and motherhood, (11) women's quality life and sexual violence, and (12) other issues relating Muslim women and their way of life, working women, women and social roles, women as career leaders, women as wives behind husbands' success, women as successful mothers, female reproductive issues, and women and the mass media. In addition, what should be dressed in the media include issues on (1) women working for social benefits, (2) women's participation in making a better society, (3) women applying religious knowledge to daily life, (4) women as roles model, (5) women behind family's success, and (6) educated women.*

**Keywords:** *unreported issues; feminist issues; Thailand's southern unrest*

### INTRODUCTION

The current unrest situation in Thailand's southernmost provinces has existed since 2004 when the Thai army's Fourth Engineering Battalion in Narathiwat province was attacked on January 4. Violence has continued unabated up to the present time. The ongoing conflict is complicating and threatening the lives of people, especially women in the region. They feel unsafe and concern about their daily life. Many lost their sons, fathers, husbands and other family members. The

violence has left many more women bereft of husbands and breadwinners. Sherly

During 2004-2009, there were 1,762 widows. Examinations of media portrayal on women during the unrest situation reveal that there has rarely been coverage on this particular issue. The news media pay special attention to negative events, such as daily killings, bomb blasts, beheadings, and destruction of state property. This study aims at examining unreported feminist issues of

the conflict and their newsworthiness to be presented in the media.

The media do not simply report events that are naturally newsworthy. In fact, news is the end-product of a complex process, which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics, according to a socially constructed set of categories. This involves selecting from the many contending items within any category, those that are felt to be of interest to readers. At the general level, this consists of an orientation to items that are 'out of the ordinary', which in some way breach our 'normal' expectations about social life. News reports tend to play up extraordinary, dramatic, and tragic elements in each story in order to enhance its newsworthiness. A news report works by using words, text, and pictures, still or moving combined in different ways through the practices and techniques to construct social reality for the public.

According to Poole, news is a conservative phenomenon, a construction based on a consensus which sets limits and maintains pressures. The nature of the news itself, the kind of production it generates, together with physical limitations of time and space, and the need to attract audiences, imposes constraints both on what events make the news and on the kind of treatment they receive. As a result, news is a

reproduction of the dominant ideology of leading groups in society.

Galtung and Ruge came up with a pioneering list of interrelated factors that help to identify values in the news. They argued that events are likely to meet the criteria of newsworthiness if they satisfied the conditions of frequency, intensity, unambiguity (clarity), cultural proximity, relevance, consonance, predictability, unpredictability, continuity, composition, elite persons and elite nations, negativity and ethnocentricity. In addition to those attributes, a good piece of news should be accurate, clear, concise, and unbiased.

The theory of news values best explain how journalists and reporters have chosen to report some things over others, it is important for this study. Feminism has been defined as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systematic institutionalized sexism. It is, thus, open-ended. To understand feminism, according to Hooks, it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism. Most people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to

men and anti-male. Furthermore, masses of people continue to believe that women are subordinate to men in the domestic household. Even though masses of women have entered the workforce, even though many families are headed by women who are the sole breadwinners, the vision of domestic life which continues to dominate the nation's imagination is one in which the logic of male domination is intact, whether men are present in the home or not. The wrong minded notion of feminist movement which implies it was anti-male carried with it the wrong minded assumption that all female space would necessarily be an environment where patriarchy and sexist thinking would be absent.

In addition, feminist theory also focuses on analyzing [gender inequality and the promotion](#) of women's rights, interests, and issues, as well as seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment.

## METHOD

This study focused on unreported feminist issues of unrest situation in the Deep South of Thailand, where the majority is Melayu-Muslims. They constitute a small minority within Thailand as a whole. However, they form a near absolute

majority in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and four districts of Songkhla; Tepha, Nathawee, Chana, and Sabayoy. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with academic experts, NGOs staffs, stringers and local news reporters, victims of the ongoing unrest, and youths in the area. This is to provide the data on what characteristics of information and stories relating to feminist that the key informants consider worth reporting during the crisis. They were carried out over a period of five months, starting from October 2010 to February 2011.

## DISCUSSION

Since early 2004, news reports on the southernmost provinces have been associated with unrest and violence situation. The media have presented the issues in particular and negative ways by using strong words, such as killings, bomb blasts, and destruction of state property. These topics frequently appeared in the mainstream media. Examinations of news reporting on feminist issues in the southern unrest reveal a tendency for journalists and reporters to represent events and issues in a particular way by using words that emphasize the losses or facing the losses during the conflict. The predominant appearances of women in the media were

more often in the passive role rather than the active role, for example, violent victims who have lost beloved ones and/or beneficiaries of government aids. This suggests that the media intentionally pick some stories over others. Qualitative analysis reveals that twelve unreported feminist topics that the media have uncovered, the details are as follow:

### **Continuous Aids and Compensation for Female Victims**

The media laid emphasis on the issues of aids and compensation for female victims at the beginning when they bereft of husbands, sons, fathers, and other family members. During that time, the media focused more on government aids, the government was presented as an agent, which has played a significant and positive role in helping the victims' families. Most female victims appeared in passive role as beneficiaries of the government aids. However, the media did not cover stories about their life after losing breadwinners; how difficult they live and struggle to find jobs, to earn a living in the ongoing conflict. It is apparent that no explanations in details were reported or even appeared in the media.

### **Ways to Cope With The Crisis**

The southern unrest has left many more women lost their breadwinners.

According to the Office of Women's Affairs and Family, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security of Thailand, there are 1,762 widows in the southernmost provinces (June 10, 2009 est.). Of the total 1,762 widows; 612 were from Pattani, 541 were from Yala, 539 were from Narathiwat, and 70 were from Songkhla respectively. All have been widowed as a result of the violence since 2004. Living in the conflict area of southern Thailand is difficult for widows; they have to take responsibility for living expenses of family members. The impact on women's way of life and their reality is little known to the public. The news media do not reflect the reality of women's life but construct and reproduce social reality for the public.

### **Government Policy and Solutions Affecting Females**

The government's policy and solutions affect people in general and women in particular. The media did not devote to this sensitive issue although there was an effect on females. This is another important issue that should be presented. Over the past years, the Thai government has tried to solve the problems in the south by cooperating with people in both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many development projects were carried out to improve the

quality life of people. At the same time, many projects have created problems affecting women, for example, setting military base in Muslim community. Most of the soldiers are Buddhists from outside the southernmost provinces. They do not truly understand Muslim culture and way of people's life here. In addition, they did try to be close with women in community. As a result, many rape cases and unmarried sexual problems emerged among Muslim girls in the south. This issue has never appeared in the media.

### **Transformation Of Women's Roles**

The violence affects both men and women. This brings change in gender roles since 2004. In the previous time, the traditional male role was as a breadwinner and the female role was as a housewife whose duty was to raise righteous children. Unrest situation have led problems. It not only created negative events but also affected economic and society as a whole. Many women bereft of breadwinners started to make a living. In some cases, men lost their jobs because they were suspected of being involved in the violence by authorities. Women were forced to find jobs. This led to changes in women's role; they had to work outside, as well as to do the housework.

### **Female Participation in Resolving Problems and Peace-Building**

During the ongoing unrest, women have tried their best to find solutions to stop violence in the area. They have participated in peace-building activities through seminars, trainings, and dialogues. Women play an important role not only as housewives and active mothers but also peace lovers who make a culture of peace possible in the south.

### **Women's Attitudes Towards The Southern Unrest and Possible Ways Out**

This is another issue that should be presented in the media. When examining news coverage on the southern unrest, there rarely was coverage on this issue. Most of airtime and space were devoted to ruling elite and government views to define problems in the south. Women, who live in the conflict area, are voiceless. It clearly showed news to be a reproduction of the dominant ideology of leading groups in society.

### **Women's Rights and Roles in Islam**

As ethnic minority in Thailand, Muslim women and their roles in Islam rarely covered in the media and little known to the public. Public perception of women and Islam is devoutly obedient to parents and husband, and mothers who shape children's life. In reality, however, the holy

Qur'an states that men and women are moral equal in God's sight and are expected to fulfill the same duties of worship; prayer, faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia [8]. The media as a powerful source of public information can play a crucial role in presenting what women's rights and Islam is about.

### **Women Rights and Gender Equality**

Apart from the women's rights and roles in Islam, gender equality is another topic that was uncovered in news stories of the conflict in the south. As mentioned earlier, in Islam, both men and women are equal and also the Qur'an states that "men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard" (Qur'an, 4: 34). Although the Qur'an does say this, the superiority of men is interpreted in terms of strength by the context – men maintain women. This verse, however, refers to a relationship between a husband and a wife, not as a society in a whole. Journalists and reporters should, thus, have a clear understanding and appreciate Islam in the context of the southern region.

### **Women and Education**

Education is a basic human right. It equips people with useful skills for life improvement. At present, women in the conflict area have equal access to education, as compared with men. Education provides a great opportunity for women to be part of social and economic development, as well as finding solutions to stop violence in the area.

### **Women and Motherhood**

Mother is the first teacher in everyone's life. She teaches children how to eat, to walk, to talk and everything to raise righteous children. Furthermore, a mother plays multiple roles in the household as a spouse, a housewife or even a worker. Building a happy and loving family depends very much on mother. In the southern ongoing conflict, a mother is the most significant person to bring peace in family, a small but yet very important unit in society. This maternity role should be portrayed in the media.

### **Women's Quality Life and Sexual violence**

Women's quality life and sexual violence, particularly domestic violence occurs everywhere in the world but little was covered in the media due to its private nature. The domestic violence includes physical, verbal, sexual or emotional abuse.

According to Rosidah Pusu, a reporter and also NGOs' staff in the area said that violence against women is increasing each year. Living in difficult situation, women face both the unrest and family violence. The media should pay attention to domestic violence to stop this in the long run [9]. Ones, who confront this problem, dare not let others know, except family members and/or intimate friends due to problems within family.

### **Other Issues**

These include (1) Muslim women and their way of life, (2) working women, (3) women and social roles, (4) women as career leaders, (5) women as wives behind husbands' success, (6) women as successful mothers, (7) female reproductive issues, and (8) women and the mass media.

In the social context of Thailand, women are dominated by men; they are expected to be neat and polite. It is men's responsibility to protect and maintain women. All issues concerning feminist are considered as sensitive issues. When reporting on violence in the south, reporters and journalists pay attention on daily killings, bomb blasts, beheadings, and destruction of state property because these attract human's interest and affect lots of people in the country. News values of human interest and impact are primary

factors that determine the newsworthiness of a potential story. Feminist issues, by contrast, have little effect to people in general though it is importance but only a small number of audiences who really want to know what has happened to women in the conflict area.

In addition, what should be dressed in the media include issues on (1) women working for social benefits, (2) women's participation in making a better society, (3) women applying religious knowledge to daily life, (4) women as roles model, (5) women behind family's success, and (6) educated women. Regarding the concept of feminist theory, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow. However, gender roles and relations change, often quite rapidly, as a result of social, economic and technological trends. Gender roles in Thailand's southernmost provinces have transformed since 2004. The conflict has left many women lost their breadwinners. This forced them to earn wage and raise children alone. Women have to work outside work and do their housework. Moreover, they have also participated in resolving problems as well as in peace-building to make peace happening in their homeland.

## CONCLUSION

One of the reasons why feminist issues rarely covered in the media is due to less female reporters in the south, as compared with males. Male reporters have represented repeating attitude that women are weak and responsible for male to protect and maintain them. It is not surprising that women in the southern unrest appeared in limited issues, such as violence victims and beneficiaries of the

government aids. This showed that the reporters intentionally picked some stories over others. In order to overcome this limitation, numbers of local female reporters should be increased, as one of reporters in the area suggested that a new generation of women journalists and reporters should be more and more to be responsible for feminist issues in particular. All issues concerning women, they know well and best reporting.

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