

FORBES Thailand, January 2015

A History of Culture and Equality – Female Entrepreneurship in Thailand

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“In most economies around the world, there are fewer women than men starting and running new businesses, but there are even fewer running mature ones¹”.

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor GEM, 126m women worldwide are operating new businesses and another 98m do so at the helm of established businesses. Yet –from a global perspective – we face a huge gender equality gap. Some countries like Pakistan have a nearly non-existent female entrepreneurship rate; while on the opposite side there are currently also only six economies where men and women start and run businesses in an equal ratio, Thailand being one of them. Besides two more ASEAN countries, Indonesia and the Philippines, three others come from Sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria, Zambia, and Botswana. Increasingly, communities and countries around the globe recognize what organizations from the World Bank to Coca Cola with their programs to support female entrepreneurship already know: Women entrepreneurs are crucial to economic growth around the world.

Why does this matter?

First, women entrepreneurs do the same as their male counterparts: they are creating jobs; they innovate and contribute to the GNP of their economies. Second, there is growing evidence that women entrepreneurs are more likely to contribute to their societies by re-investing their profits in education, their family and their community. There are many examples around the world, where women entrepreneurs are transforming families and society besides making contributions to business development. Unfortunately, traditional measures in economics often do not capture the true benefits of these transformational businesses.

Drawing on our experiences as well as on our interviews with female entrepreneurs in Thailand, we see opportunities to support the economic empowerment of female entrepreneurs.

First priority is access to finance. Female entrepreneurs in particular face higher obstacles to receive finance than do men. The experience with the micro-credit loans through the work of Muhammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank show that female entrepreneurs nearly always repay their loans and invest the money in businesses that provide funds for education and that help to lift families out of poverty. Both micro-financers and banking institutions need to creatively improve their activities aimed at recognizing women’s potential for starting up or for scaling up their businesses.

¹ 2012 GEM Women’s Report

Second, in order to be able to flourish, new and existing businesses need support that can come from mentors. Different industries and business insights are valuable resources to rely upon. Most women do not have the type of support that enables them to turn to trusted advisors with experience.

Third priority is education. In order for an economy to truly benefit from a society's entrepreneurial potential, everyone must be able to participate and be supported in this activity, regardless of gender, age, education, income or other characteristics. An increasing number of women who start their businesses in Thailand now are better educated than in former years and run their businesses after having obtained a bachelor degree, especially in Bangkok, the North and the South. Nevertheless, their educational level in general is lower than the educational level of their male counterparts. For Thailand to move forward, the country needs to make better use of knowledge and innovation. Education and training initiatives should address these aspects to increase entrepreneurial activity in business services and prepare Thailand and its entrepreneurs –both female and male- to move towards an innovation- and growth-driven economy.

What is different?

Based on our experiences, women entrepreneurs see the world through a different lens and, in turn, do things differently. This is not only expressed in the type of businesses women start, but also in the way they lead in their enterprises. In Thai history, the valuation of women as important partners has a long tradition. Celebrating women as heroines is emphasized in Thai history in metaphors of women who can demonstrate their strength through fighting with a sword as well as showing honor, obedience, love and respect, enabling them to blend mastery and femininity in business. For example, take the two heroines in Phuket, Thao Thepkrasattri and Thao Srisoonthorn, who successfully defended the island against a Burmese invasion in 1785.

Similar metaphors with reference to Thai culture are used by successful female entrepreneurs who quote that they are gentle and not aggressive. On the other hand, once you experience them in their businesses, you would be surprised and ask: 'Is that really her?' To some women, achievement in business means to be the role model of the others and to contribute to the society while at the same time having the burning energy to go forward, the burning energy to work harder, and the burning energy to be able to give something for the others; burning energy also meaning to conquer. Thai women at home "rock the cradle, take care of the babies, bring up the family, do the cooking, schooling and welfare, and at the same time, in the time of war, they also can be at the battlefield and save the nation, the little kingdoms that Thailand is made of."