

POLITICAL ELITES IN THAILAND : A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
MALE AND FEMALE PARLIAMENTARIANS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that women make up nearly half of the entire population<sup>1</sup> and represent 45 percent of the labor force<sup>2</sup> in Thailand, they participate in politics less than men.<sup>3</sup> Women are usually involved in family decision-making and have important responsibilities within the family,<sup>4</sup> but outside the family, Thai women have not been well-represented

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<sup>1</sup>Government of Thailand, The Fourth National Economic and Social Development Plan, 1977-1981 (Bangkok: Thailand: National Economic and Social Development Board, Office of the Prime Minister), p. 289.

<sup>2</sup>Nantanee Jayasut et al., Status of Thai Women in Two Rural Areas: A Survey Report (Bangkok, Thailand: National Council of Women of Thailand, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Government of Thailand, p. 290.

<sup>4</sup>Many scholars have shown that the primary responsibilities of women have always been seen as those of raising children and running the household. For example, see Sylvia A. Chipp and Justin J. Green, Asian Women in Transition (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p. 87; Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, Political Woman (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974); Edmond Costantini and Kenneth H. Craik, "Women as Politicians: The Social Background, Personality, and Political Careers of Female Party Leaders," Journal of Social Issues 28 (1972): 217-236; M. Kent Jennings and Norman Thomas, "Men and Women in Party Elites: Social Roles and Political Resources," Midwest Journal of Political Science 12 (November 1968): 462-492; Marcia Manning Lee, "Why Few Women Hold Public Office: Democracy and Sexual Roles," Political Science Quarterly 91 (Summer 1976): 297-314; and Naomi Lynn and Cornelia Butler Flora, "Societal Punishment and Aspects of Female Political Participation: 1972 National Convention Delegates." in A Portrait of Marginality, ed. Marianne Githens and Jewel L. Prestage (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 139-149.

in the community, district, provincial, or national decision-making arenas.<sup>5</sup> Although Thai women, as well as men, have had the right to vote and to run for office since 1932, when Thailand acquired its first constitution,<sup>6</sup> but it was not until 1949 that a woman was finally elected to the lower house of the Parliament. Since 1949 only twenty-seven women have been elected to the lower house of the Parliament; nine of them served in the lower house during the session 1979-1983. (There are also three women in the upper house, an appointed body that consists of 225 members.)<sup>7</sup> It is significant to note, therefore, that more women served in the Parliament during the 1979-1983 session than at any other time in history.<sup>8</sup> While still too few to cause rejoicing among "women's rights" activists, the presence of these parliamentarians does indicate movement toward greater participation by woman in Thai politics. One aspect of this participation is the focus of this research.

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<sup>5</sup> Nantanee Jayasut et al., p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> From 1949 to 1978 only eight women were appointed to serve in the upper house. In the 1979-1983 session three women hold such posts.

<sup>8</sup> This number does not include those women appointed in 1973, a year of temporary disruption in the usual process. In 1973, 2,347 people were appointed to serve in a temporary body, the "National Assembly." of that number, 122 (or 5.2 percent) were women. Later in the year the total was reduced to 299 of which 16 were women. The following year Thailand reverted to the former Parliament system of 269 elected members. Only three women won election that year (only 1.1 percent of the total number).