

# The Origins of the Women's Movement in the Philippines and Thailand: A Preliminary Comparison

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## ABSTRACT

This paper traces the burgeoning of the women's movement in two ASEAN countries—the Philippines and Thailand, chosen for their distinctive colonial experiences. It endeavors to identify commonalities and dissensions in the history of their fight for women's rights and further looks at the direction taken by the respective women's movements that emerged in these two countries. In carrying out this aim, this research investigates how distinctive colonial experiences shaped the origins of these countries' women's movements. Utilizing the transnational feminist approach, this study analyzes particular contexts and dynamics in the region that helped shape the direction of women's fight for a better place in society, taking into consideration nationality, class, religion, and region as important variables. It provides the context to the origins of the women's movement in the Philippines and Thailand from pre-colonial times for the Philippines and from the pre-1932 period for Thailand up until

1945 at the end of World War II. A preliminary comparison is done, focusing on the different factors that influenced the beginnings of the women's movement in both countries, the role of the market economy in providing different experiences for women from different classes, the struggle for gender equality through religious feminism, and how the attainment of women's political rights in the 1930s affected women's participation in politics.

Spurred, moreover, by the aim of affording recognition to women who transcended societal limitations, this research underscores the struggles of Filipino and Thai women in forging the path of the women's movement in their respective countries. It enjoins academics to undertake topics that will highlight women's role in history and supplement the gaps within comparative studies of women in ASEAN nations.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional history books had long featured a silenced or misrepresented depiction of women in their narratives, thereby giving the impression of women's passive role in history. The initial focus on political and diplomatic history, the patriarchal view espoused by male historians, the notion that men's experience in history is the same as that of women, and the assumption that we do not have enough sources for women's history all contributed to women's invisibility in history (Camagay, 1998).

To highlight women's struggles in shaping the direction of the women's movement in the ASEAN region, this research will endeavor to explore the histories of the Philippines and Thailand. The choice of Philippines and Thailand is deliberate, for the Philippines has a long history of colonial rule while Thailand has prided itself for being the only country in Southeast Asia that has largely maintained its sovereignty amidst the Western colonial presence in the region.

## OBJECTIVES

This study will inquire into the commonalities and differences in the history of the fight for women's rights and the direction taken by the women's movements in the Philippines and Thailand through an exploration of the following: women's early status, education, religion, the rise of women's organizations, women's writings and women's participation in the nationalist struggle which will be viewed following this periodization: the Philippines in the precolonial period (prehistoric to the beginning of Spanish colonialism in 1565), under Spanish colonization from 1565 to 1898, and the period of American imperialism from 1898 to 1942. Thailand will be examined through its dynastic periods of the Sukhothai Kingdom (1238–1348), the Ayuthaya Period (1348–1767), the Thonburi Period (1767–1782), and the Rattanakosin Period from 1782 to the present; and, from the rule of kings from Rama I to Rama VIII from ancient times until 1932 which marked the Siamese Revolution. This preliminary study will end with a brief situationer for both countries post-World War II.

While these two countries underwent diverse historical and sociopolitical developments, these experiences, even if different, molded a collective women's oppression and struggle. Finally, this study aims to make a humble contribution in addressing the gap in feminist historiography in ASEAN studies, specifically in doing comparative work on women to connect and link with our Asian neighbors.

## METHODOLOGY

This study mostly utilized archival research and key informant interviews as research methods to generate primary and secondary sources. Materials on the history of the women's movements both in the Philippines and Thailand were sourced from archives and libraries in the Philippines and in Thailand while some were accessed online. Informant interviews of important women in both the Philippines and Thailand contributed to this research by situating the women's movement within the wider realm of historical and social developments. Interviews with

a veteran feminist historian and a GABRIELA Women's Partylist Representative (an active member of the movement for more than 30 years) proved valuable as an anchor of the history of the women's movement in the history of the Philippines. For Thailand, interviews with two important figures, a programme manager of a women's non-government organization and an academic who is an advocate of women's enhanced roles in the peacebuilding process as well as a prolific researcher on gender in politics and development, provided this research with insights on women's involvements in Thailand.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses the transnational feminist approach, a feminist theory that challenges the idea that "women around the world share the same types of experiences, oppressions, forms of exploitation, and privileges ... [highlighting] intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, social activism and justice, and collaboration" (Enns et al., 2020, p. 2), rejecting the idea of global sisterhood or the tendency of Euro-American women to universalize the forms of oppression they face in their own lives. This research hopes to make a preliminary comparative analysis of the origins of the women's movement in two ASEAN countries, the Philippines and Thailand, by looking at contexts and dynamics in the region that helped shape the direction of women's fight for a better place in society. This will be carried out by considering various factors of gender, race, class, and religious background and its effect upon women's social, political, and economic conditions and how women pursued their struggle to end their oppression.

In analyzing the beginnings of the women's movement in the Philippines and Thailand, the factors of colonialism, imperialism, modernization, globalization, and capitalism affecting women's oppression across nations, races, ethnicities, religions, and classes, are likewise considered. Moreover, by using the transnational feminist approach, this study will veer away from the tendency of classical feminist theories (especially liberal feminism) to look at women from third world countries as victims of outdated religious and patriarchal structures, recognizing that gender oppression takes different forms in different social, cultural,

and geographical locations while facing systemic disadvantages such as poverty, overwork, and political marginalization (Lange, 2009). Furthermore, images of the “third world woman”—as the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife—are images that were borne out of a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing first/third world connections (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352).

### PRELIMINARY COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

To render a preliminary comparative analysis of women's involvements in the Philippines and Thailand necessitates an exploration of women's status, education, mass media, market economy, and involvement in the nationalist struggles, within the larger context of history and society. These are considered alongside the impact of colonial experience in the Philippines, or the absence thereof in Thailand's case, upon the development of the women's movement well into the post-World War II scenario.

#### Status of Women in Early Philippines and Thailand

Filipino women enjoyed a higher social stature in precolonial times than in succeeding periods in history. Myths suggesting the equal importance given to men and women abound, such as the Visayan myth of *Sicalac* and *Sicavay* and the Igorot myth of *Alelayo* and *Aremaya*, among others (Eugenio, 2001). Women enjoyed certain rights and privileges (Mananzan, 1991), experienced sexual freedom (Jose & Navarro, 2010), and functioned as religious leaders called *babaylanes* (Salazar, 1989). This collective consciousness among women regarding their esteemed place in the community was the basis of an early form of feminism in the Philippines, which Mangahas and Llaguno (2006) call “*babaylanism*.”

The high social stature of women in the Philippines is not echoed in Thailand where male supremacy and female subservience are steeped in Thai tradition, closely intertwined with Buddhism. Embedded in Thai culture and tradition are representations of gender roles and politics where male leadership is stressed versus female subservience by the following aphorisms:

“hind legs of an elephant” where the man represents the forelegs while the woman the hind legs and “wives are like thread and follow the needle” (Jermittiparsert, 2016). Further, a Thai woman’s treatment as a possession is embodied in the saying “women are buffaloes and men are men” (Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1991). These sayings illustrate the inferior status of women subject to the exercise of absolute control of their master.

The egalitarian nature of Filipino women’s social position in precolonial times may be ascribed to the matriarchal nature of society, while the subservient status of Thai women in the pre-1932 period is believed to have been rooted primarily in their culture and religion, Buddhism, or at least in how men, particularly the monks, interpreted the sacred texts to suit their gender ideology. In the Philippines, it was Spanish colonialism that gradually changed the position of women in society through Catholicism, education, laws, and culture, while in Thailand, the process of modernization and the integration of Thailand into the global capitalist economy greatly influenced the women’s movement. In this regard, the different historical experiences as well as political and geographical contexts of the two countries must be taken into consideration to draw comparative insights on the origins of the women’s movement in these two ASEAN countries.

### **Women and Education**

Women’s social status in the Philippines gradually regressed upon the imposition of Spanish colonialism beginning in 1565, through the introduction of Spanish customs, religion, laws, and education. To implement a new social order in the colony, the colonizers imposed their own tenets of morality, primarily through the Catholic Church (Jose & Navarro, 2010). Spanish laws contained provisions which restricted women’s freedom, especially that of married women (Feliciano, 1989). Education for women was also restricted since *colegios* and *beaterios* only accepted women from the middle class, and their curriculum revolved around religion, home economics, and music, aside from the basic subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic (Sobritchea, 1989). It was only upon promulgation of Act 74 of 1901 by the American civil government that the implementation of public instruction made free education accessible to girls and boys.

In Thailand, traditional educational instruction was limited and elite-guided. While accessible to female royalty and the elite, it was administered within the confines of the temple or palace. Only in the 14th century were educational reforms put in place allowing women's education, previously confined to the domestic arts, to include instruction on religion, literature, and history (Kabilsingh, 1991). Slowly, Western instruction became part of the Thai curriculum, brought about by the exposure of the male royalty to Western education and Thailand's foreign relations with the Western world (Tantiwiranond, 2007). The passage of the Primary Education Act in 1921 allowed for universal compulsory education as a legal requirement for boys and girls of all classes, thereby granting to non-elite Thai access to education (Keyes, 1991). Meanwhile at the tertiary level, elite women began pursuing higher learning in the university and, in 1927, Chulalongkorn University had women studying the arts and sciences (Kabilsingh, 1991). These pioneer women students later spearheaded university women's movements and, thereafter, women's professional organizations. Activism by non-elite Thai women only started after education became a right in 1921 and once it had become established in the country's remote villages (Costa, 1997).

The access to education greatly empowered both the Filipino and Thai woman and shaped her activism in the espousal of women's causes. In the Philippines, educated women—labeled as “*panuelo* activists”<sup>1</sup> of the early 20th century—championed the fight for women's suffrage (Tirona, 1989). The activism displayed by these women focused initially on social welfare projects, such as *La Gota de Leche* which aimed to reduce the infant mortality rate by providing free and safe milk for babies, as well as the puericulture centers which aimed to take care of children and provide the needed childcare information for mothers. The direction would later shift to the campaign for women's political rights, especially when suffragists Carrie Chapman

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<sup>1</sup> These women were found dressed in the traditional *traje de mestiza* with accompanying *panuelo*, a small triangular shawl worn around the shoulders and neck which had become a trademark for middle-class women during the Spanish period and even up to the early years of the American period as they embarked on their causes. Dressed in their *panueloed ternos*, they looked too dainty and too fragile for activism (Tirona, 1989).

Catt from the United States and Aleta Jacobs from Holland came to the Philippines to encourage our women to fight for women's suffrage—although not many Filipino women were ready for this at that time. The Philippine Association of University Women (PAUW) then took on the challenge to fight for women's right to vote, and thus a strong women's movement emerged as an offshoot of the educational opportunities in the early years of American colonization (Camagay, 2021).

### Women and Mass Media

Mass media played a significant role in espousing women's issues both in the Philippines and Thailand. In the Philippines, we owe the literature on the women's movement to Paz Mendoza-Guazon and Encarnacion Alzona, as the works that they produced were propaganda materials and the first documentation of the progress and development of the Filipina (Camagay, 2021). Women's magazines also played a crucial role in the women's movement for they served as mouthpieces of women's organizations, especially on women's issues. However, the first women's magazines published during the 1890s such as *La Ilustracion Filipina* and *El Bello Sexo* focused on fashion, domestic concerns, and morality combined with articles on science, history, and literature and became instrumental in subjugating women to feudalistic patriarchy, owing to the prevalent conservatism during the Spanish period. It was during the American regime that women's magazines became sites for advocating women's rights, beginning with Constanca Poblete's *Filipinas Revista Semanal Ilustrada*, a weekly illustrated magazine in both Spanish and Tagalog which tackled women's issues involving education, activities of feminist organizations, and the importance of women in society. Other publications followed suit, such as *Women's Outlook*, *Woman's Journal*, *Women's World*, and *Woman's Magazine*, among others. These were published by educated women from the upper middle class, most of whom were also active in the campaign for women's suffrage such as Pura Villanueva-Kalaw, Rosa Sevilla, Encarnacion Alzona, and Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon. Hence, these magazines became a fundamental part of the women's struggle for equality in the workplace and in the law (Encanto, 2004). Even the newspapers during the 1920s and 1930s carried



the women's suffrage issue, proving that the campaign was really in print (Camagay, 2021).

Similarly, the years leading up to the momentous year of 1932 in Thailand witnessed the emergence of a more dynamic espousal of women's issues, with aristocrats and highly educated middle-class women actively demanding empowerment and equality, an advocacy which they carried in print. The publication of women's magazines in the 1900s provided a mouthpiece for women and their struggles as they began to write about their issues and demands in newspapers and magazines for women. Print media became a platform that politicized issues and problems challenging women in both public places and the political system (Buranajaroenkij, 2017). While these issues first saw print in the early 1900s, with *Kulsatree* (1906) which was critical of polygamy and patriarchy (Buranajaroenkij, 2017), it was only in the 1920s and '30s that magazines written by women and for women emerged. Magazines that promoted a political and feminist orientation were *Ying Thai* (*Thai Woman*) and *Sao Sayam* (*Young Siamese Woman*). *Ying Thai* was owned and controlled by a woman publisher by the name of Nang Sap Angkinan and featured an all-woman editorial team (Barmé, 2002). Then came the publication of radical women's magazines such as *Satri Thai* (1925) and *Net-nari* (1932) which, along with *Ying Thai* (1932), embodied the voices of the middle-class women (Posrithong, 2015). This initial impetus in print was followed by an ascending clamor for women's rights as women tackled and defied the issues on polygamy, polygyny, and vigorously criticized patriarchy (Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1991). Women took to print to ventilate their grievances and wrote lengthy editorials and letters to the editor criticizing society's suppression and oppression of women. Articles on family laws and their aspirations for monogamy, for equality in education and employment opportunities, were likewise penned. Satirical cartoons denounced polygyny and polygamy (Barmé, 2002). Within the pages of these magazines it can be said that the woman's pen was mightier than the sword as they moved towards publicizing their issues and ambitions.

The spread of print and film—of both foreign and local varieties—led the Thai audiences, mostly from the middle class, to be exposed to a plethora of new narratives from which they

could shape, inform, and enrich their lives; from the middle class emerged the leading proponents of notions integral to the idea of modernity itself, the belief in such things as human equality, individual freedom, and female emancipation. (Barmé, 2002, p. 9)

The proliferation of mass media tools because of the growth of the Thai market would have a direct impact on the women's movement in Thailand. The urban population was exposed to novel ideas and images from within the country as well as abroad. Issues such as social and gender inequality were much debated in the press, particularly issues regarding education and marriage. Views were expressed on the right of women from all classes to be educated, while the issue of polygamy continued to be challenged. Magazines published in the early decades of the 20th century espoused a feminist and political orientation and became an avenue for women from the aristocracy and the middle class to question absolute monarchy and the social, political, and economic inequalities it created while demanding women empowerment and gender equality. Even in the field of literature, early developments began to take place during this period with the emergence of modern novels written by Thai women writers, depicting Thai culture and society. After the 1932 revolution, women writers published novels exploring women's issues, such as *Ying khon chua (The Prostitute)* by K. Surangkhanang. Another important woman writer was M. L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn who wrote about the pressures women had to endure in Thai society (Kintanar, 2008), although she wrote at a later period.

### **Women Warriors**

Despite colonial efforts to subjugate Filipino women to a lowly status, there were some notable women who were able to challenge the limitations imposed on them and achieve feats in the military sphere. Gabriela Silang led the revolt against the Spaniards in Ilocos when her husband, Diego Silang, was treacherously killed in 1763 (Routledge, 1979). The Philippine revolution witnessed the founding of the women's chapter of the Katipunan in 1893 (Rodriguez-Tatel, 1998). The fight for independence

continued under American colonial rule and beyond. In the aftermath of the Philippine-American War in 1913, social movements emerged due to social unrest. Women who joined the anti-colonial struggle came from the grassroots level, while those who championed the fight for political rights came from wealthy families (Taguiwalo, 1997).

Women took on various roles in the Philippine-American War. Some served as nurturers of sick and wounded soldiers, establishing the Philippine Women's Red Cross to centralize their activities (Hilaria Aguinaldo, Trinidad Famy, and Felicidad Aguinaldo); others were active in the field of propaganda (Rosa Sevilla-Alvero and Florentina Arellano); some were revolutionary leaders (Trinidad Tecson, Agueda Kahabagan, Teresa Magbanua, Flora Martinez, Susan Nacional, and Francisca Cabanas); still others contributed their services through various means such as raising funds (Almeida Filomena; Eleuteria Florentino, and Conching Calvo), providing supplies (Carmen de los Reyes, Lucia del Rosario, Salome Reyes, and Praxedes Fajardo), and even smuggling the Philippine flag for the inauguration of the revolutionary government in Santa Barbara, Iloilo (Patrocinio Gamboa) (Ong, 2010; Cruz, 1989). These were only some of the women who proved that they were not mere spectators while men were fighting for our freedom.

Women also became active in social movements such as Sakdal and Colorum. One notable woman from Sakdal was Salud Algabre who joined the *Sakdalistas* in their resistance against the American-sponsored Commonwealth government. While the Sakdal uprising failed to achieve its purpose, Algabre remained steadfast in her belief that no uprising fails as each step is a step in the right direction (Sturtevant, 1976, p. 296). Another woman figured prominently in the Colorum<sup>2</sup> uprising in Pangasinan in 1931 when, in the middle of the gun battle, she came out of the convent carrying a Philippine flag, went straight to the plaza, and was shot and killed by American soldiers (Navarro, 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> Members of this organization were known for their "fanaticism," with the term *colorum* deriving from their mispronunciation of the line "*saecula saeculorum*" found at the end of many Latin prayers. More *colorum* organizations were formed during the American regime (Guerrero, 1967, p. 65).

Due to the absence of any colonial control in Thailand, no anti-colonialist women's movements emerged (Phongpaichit, 2002). However, the military exploits of Thai noblewomen are the subject of myths and legends, with monuments installed to revere or even deify them (Tanaakarachod, 2009). Thai warrior queens are known for their exploits on the battlefield in their quest for Siam's autonomy during ancient times. In the 7th century, Queen Chamadevi, Mon warrior-queen of Lanna (Northern Thailand), is said to have used menstrual blood and women's undergarments, culturally deemed unclean or polluted, as weapons to weaken male opponents. Queen Sri Suriyothai of Ayutthaya fought alongside her king during the Burmese-Siamese War (1548-69) (Falk, 2007). Princess Suphankaya is revered as a martyr for her sacrifice in forging an alliance through marriage with Burma (Posrithong, 2015). In 1785, Khunying Muk and Jan disguised themselves and other women as male soldiers and fought against the Burmese and defended Thalang (now Phuket) from invasion (Tanaakarachod, 2009). In 1826, Khunying Mo fought off the Lao army by pretenses of cooperation while mobilizing women to fight alongside the menfolk (Svasti, 2016). Another kind of war was waged by a commoner named Amdaeng Muan who, in the 1860s, openly criticized royal laws on arranged marriages. Despite being meted out a sentence of corporal punishment, she petitioned the king to enact legislation prohibiting the sale of one's wife and daughter and granting women the freedom to choose their own partner. In a redress of grievances, Rama IV conceded that women had been unfairly treated as "buffaloes" in history and thus amended parental rights, ended corporal punishment on women, allowed the woman her choice of spouse, ended the practice of arranged marriages among commoners (Loos, 2018), and reduced the right of a husband to sell his wife/wives (Pruekpongsawalee, 2004).

### **The First Women's Associations (Late 19th Century Up to the Early 1940s)**

The *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* was the first feminist association in the Philippines organized in 1905. Founded by Concepcion Felix, it was the first women's organization to use the term

“feminist”<sup>3</sup> in its name and was composed of educated women from wealthy families. It was dedicated to the promotion of social welfare and the encouragement of women's participation in public affairs. A year later, Pura Villanueva Kalaw founded the *Asociacion Feminista Ilonga*, the first women's organization to push for women's suffrage. Working together, these two women's associations paved the way for women to get the vote and be elected to public office (Subido, 1955). More similar women's clubs were formed in the years that followed, most of which pushed for the women's suffrage bill, which was finally enacted into law in 1937 after a plebiscite was held, resulting in 447,725 women voting in favor of the bill when only 300,000 votes were needed for it to be approved (Alzona, 1934).

The period from 1905 to 1937 was truly a challenging time for Filipino women. The *panuelo* activists who emerged were truly a product of their time, for historical developments have shown how colonial policies produced such women of substance who believed that social reforms and political rights would help empower women. Some would say that these women exhibited an elitist form of feminism (Quindoza-Santiago, 1995), while some believe that these women had their own feminist consciousness despite being influenced by suffragists from the US and should be labeled as the first liberal feminists in the country (Mangahas, 2003). Feminists or not, their struggle helped shape the direction of the women's movement in the Philippines.

Pioneer women's organizations in Thailand had aristocratic women at their helm. While not as mobile as their peasant sisters, they had proximity to the ruling powers and exercised a certain degree of political clout and economic power to carry out projects concerning women. In 1885, the *Sapa Unalom Daeng* was established by a group of elite women (Costa, 1997). Queen Saowapa, the first Siam regent, formalized this group to become the Thai Red Cross. Saowapa was popular in her espousal of women's causes and gained Western recognition when she raised funds

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the term “feminist” should be properly contextualized and must be differentiated from the meaning we ascribe to the term during the 1970s, when it was more of a fight against patriarchy (Camagay, 2021).

for the care of wounded Thai soldiers during Thailand's border dispute with France in 1893. This welfare activity of the Queen Regent highlighted the potential of women's involvement in the nation's affairs and became a progenitor of the social and political activism of Thai women. Saowapa, in 1904, founded a school for girls, the Rajini School or Queen's School to educate girls in the Thai and English languages, arts and handicrafts, morality, and discipline (Tantiwiranond & Pandey, 1991; Rajini School, n.d.). She later sent Thai women to study midwifery in Britain, an act which challenged traditional Thai medical arts; and she also sponsored a medical school (Bowie, 2010). A similar undertaking by Princess Sook Sri Samorn Kasemsri was the founding of the Khemasirinusorn School, utilizing her inheritance money, in September 1932 (Onozawa, 2000).

It was from 1932 to 1943 where women's organizations undertook diverse involvements. Some associations continued to embark on charity-welfare activities. Other groups were formed to provide a venue for women's gatherings—mostly for elite women and comprised predominantly of housewives. Still others were professionally oriented, like the organization of women in the legal profession, while others were religious (Tantiwiranond & Pandey, 1991). The Women's Association of Siam was a formally registered entity in 1932 which aimed at forging unity among women and operated as a venue of continuing learning. In the latter, the association catered to providing supplemental education for women's domestic and child-rearing activities (Falk, 2010). A similar association was founded in 1932 and named the Thai Solidarity Association (Buranajaroenkij, 2017). The Thai Women's Association of Thailand championed the cause against class discrimination and the plight of women laborers and sex workers and is still in existence to date (Falk, 2010). Under the National Culture Act of 1942, an Office of Culture on Women's Affairs or Women's Bureau was launched in 1943 (Pruekpongsawalee, 2004). A parallel Women's Cultural Club was established in the manner of a Western women's club. This group was composed of women within and outside the bureaucracy and advocated instruction in home economics and social welfare (Tantiwiranond & Pandey, 1991). Such early women's associations underwent a period of an interlude with the advent of World War II.

## **Impact of Different Colonial Experiences on the Women's Movement**

The women's movement in the Philippines was born out of the anti-colonial struggle in the late 19th century with the establishment of the women's chapter of the Katipunan in 1893. However, even earlier forms of women's resistance are traced back to the 1816 strike of *cigarreras* and the fight for education by the "20 women of Malolos" in 1888. Spanish colonialism had built a patriarchal structure in the colony where Filipino women were discriminated against not only based on gender but also on class, religion, and ethnicity. Thus, while women from the middle class resented gender inequality in terms of having unequal educational opportunities, women from the lower class experienced a different type of discrimination based on unfair wages and labor practices. With the birth of the Katipunan in 1892, the time was ripe for Filipino revolutionaries to fight for freedom from colonial rule, and for women to participate in that struggle a year after the revolutionary group was formed. In the early decades of American imperialism, women from the middle and upper classes fought for political and social reforms while those from the masses continued fighting the colonizers through armed struggle, a task they persisted in even during the fight against the Japanese during World War II. It was during the resurgence of the women's movement in the 1960s that women's issues became part of the feminist agenda.

While Thailand's case is exceptional, since it never experienced colonialism at a time when Southeast Asian countries were being dominated by Western powers, the rise of the women's movement in Thailand could also be partly attributed to external forces. Thailand's modernization process was initiated by no less than the royalty itself, beginning in the late 19th to early 20th centuries when it began modernizing and negotiating with the major foreign powers, especially France and Britain, to maintain its political and economic sovereignty. In a way, Thailand's move to modernize and transform itself into a global nation would have a direct impact on the spread of new mass media technologies (Barmé, 2002), which in turn would influence the growth of the women's movement.

Different experiences of the Philippines and Thailand with regard to colonialism may also be deduced from the ties established with women's movements in the West. Since the Philippines was an American colony at the time when women's suffrage was being lobbied, local women suffragists had links with their counterparts in America, with Carrie Chapman Catt from the US and Aleta Jacobs from the Netherlands visiting the Philippines in 1912 to lend their support to the cause. In Thailand, the interchange between local and Western feminists was comparatively limited. Thus, while the first feminist associations were established in the Philippines in the early decades of the 20th century, feminist ideas regarding equality and social justice were being discussed in Thailand through the proliferation of mass media (Barmé, 2002). After all, it has been noted that, as early as 1897, Thai women were already given the right to vote at the village level and, at the national level, women's suffrage was granted after the 1932 Siamese Revolution, with its primary agenda of providing equal rights and freedom to all classes and genders (Buranajaroenkij, 2017).

### **Market Economy and the Women's Movement**

The late 19th century was a crucial period for both Thailand and the Philippines, a time when the market economy led to fundamental social transformations in both countries. In the Philippines, the shift from the galleon trade to a cash crop economy produced a middle class and provided educational opportunities for women. This market economy would also lead to the availability of jobs for women which were subjected to state supervision of industrial labor. As documented by Camagay (1995), women in Manila were employed as cigar-makers, domestic servants, store owners and vendors, seamstresses and embroiderers, schoolteachers, midwives, and even prostitutes.

There was, of course, no more a single experience for Filipino women in the 19th century, any more than there was for Filipinos in general. Class and region, in particular, should be seen as important variables. The best documented Filipinas of the 19th century would have been members of the new elite, especially in Manila. (Owen, 2007, p. 6)



In the case of Thailand, the late 19th century was also the time when the middle class was formed, with women coming from this class tending to accumulate wealth and build economic power. Middle-class women also benefitted from the market economy by gaining more educational opportunities and using mass media to push for women's rights. On the other hand, women from the lower class were also able to take advantage of developmental measures by gaining employment as workers. Post-World War II, Thai women could be found in these sectors: agriculture, education, services and craftsmanship, cookery, dressmaking, in government, undertaking clerical work or skilled labor (Onozawa, 2000). The advancement of women workers' issues was already being tackled in magazines in the early 20th century. Later, state policies were implemented that were more focused on supporting investment rather than the protection of labor rights, resulting in labor issues such as exploitation, low wages, lack of welfare and worker protection schemes, long working hours, among others (Buranajaroenkij, 2017, p. 5).

Thus, despite having different colonial experiences, both the Philippines and Thailand were subjected to the same global capitalist economy towards the end of the 19th century—which affected women differently because of liberalization in the case of the Philippines and because of modernization in the case of Thailand. While this economic trend proved advantageous to both women from the middle class and the lower class, it also resulted in gender inequalities particularly in the labor sector, pushing women's actions toward solidarity and more rights for women workers.

### **Post-World War II Scenario for the Women's Movement**

Both in the Philippines and Thailand, women were more confined to the domestic sphere after World War II, and the gender ideology of women being homemakers, maintaining the values and traditions of the family became more prevalent. In the Philippines, women's work focused more on civic activities while, in Thailand, the idea of women as the "Flower of the Nation" emphasizing beauty, humility, being respectful, and dressing accordingly was reinforced, especially during the military regime led by Plaek Phibunsongkhram. This was a time when differences

in the power relationships between genders also involved an economic dimension, as women with better economic status tended to accumulate wealth and build economic power through informal gold and land trading businesses (Buranajaroenkij, 2017, p. 3).

The women's movement in both countries gained momentum from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. In the Philippines, the "First Quarter Storm" which was characterized by civil unrest during the first quarter of the year 1970 saw a series of demonstrations, protests, and marches, mostly organized by students, against then President Ferdinand Marcos. This student activism would influence the founding of women's organizations, some of which espoused the feminist agenda.

Meanwhile, the success of the student movement in the October 1973 Uprising in Thailand also led to increasing student activism and bolstered the women's movement. In 1974, female students of Thammasat University joined together to push for social justice and the status of women in society, tackling issues such as women's participation in development, relations between sex workers and capitalism, and the objectification of women in beauty pageants (Buranajaroenkij, 2017)—an issue which was also addressed by the Philippines' MAKIBAKA movement during the Binibining Pilipinas beauty contest in 1970. Similarly, Thailand and the Philippines' experiences with military rule—in 1972 when President Marcos declared Martial Law, and in 1976 during the military takeover in Thailand—heightened women's activism in the movement as more women's organizations were formed, especially after the 1983 assassination of former Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino. Meanwhile, in Thailand, students lent their support to the workers' cause by joining the strikes which demonstrated the strength of female workers in negotiating with capitalist powers (Buranajaroenkij, 2017, p. 5). The year 1974 was a milestone for Thai women as women's issues and gender equality were addressed for the first time in Thai political and legal history (Somswasdi, 2003).

At present, Thailand has numerous women's groups and social movements with women's issues as part of their agenda, such as violence against women, care work and unpaid work rooted in gender norms, and gender and culture in the Muslim context. Recently, a feminist movement

called “Women for Freedom and Democracy” emerged, advocating the women’s agenda such as safe abortion, anti-violence against women, rights to same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, etc. There is also a move to enhance women’s participation in peace-building projects and the peace dialogue process through the women’s peace network called Peace Agenda of Women (PAOW) (Buranajaroenkij, 2021).

## ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Comparing the origins of the women’s movement in the Philippines and Thailand, we can deduce notable similarities and differences. Looking back at women’s status in early times, Filipino women enjoyed an egalitarian status in society, while Thai women had a subservient social status primarily due to cultural and religious factors. In terms of education, women from both countries saw limited educational opportunities before the 20th century but their situation improved in the early 1900s, with the implementation of Act 74 of 1901 in the Philippines and the Primary Education Act of 1921 in Thailand that provided more educational opportunities for women. The proliferation of mass media in the same period also impacted the women’s movement in both countries—with women’s magazines serving as mouthpieces for women’s issues such as women’s suffrage in the Philippines, while issues of polygamy, patriarchy, educational and employment opportunities were advanced in Thailand. Both countries were also not lacking in women warriors albeit in different contexts, with women from the Philippines fighting against the Spanish and later the American colonizers, while those from Thailand fought for autonomy from neighboring powers such as Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. Coincidentally, the founding of the women’s chapter of the Katipunan in the Philippines and the Thai Red Cross in Thailand both took place in 1893 and both could be placed within the context of resistance against Western powers (Spain for the Philippines and France for Thailand). This led to the formation of the first women’s associations with socio-civic aims in the early 20th century in both countries, evolving into the campaign for women’s suffrage in the Philippines.

Both countries were also subjected to economic transformations by the end of the 19th century due to the shift to the market economy, which affected women differently. Nevertheless, both countries witnessed the rise of middle-class women who gained reforms in terms of education and political rights as well as accumulation of wealth, while women from the masses became integrated into the labor force as workers and subjected to further exploitation, thus heightening women's actions in support of the women workers' cause.

Finally, it should be noted that, despite having gained political rights in the 1930s, women continued to be underrepresented in the political sphere in both countries due to existing patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, with the idea that politics is a man's world and women are weak, feeble-minded, and indecisive. The multiple burdens being experienced by women also hindered them from joining the political arena. In Thailand, some would say that there is gender equality since there are women in the Parliament. However, these women representatives are mocked by their male counterparts (Sinprasert, 2021), a situation not very different from our experience here in the Philippines where women leaders are being criticized by no less than the top official of the country (Esguerra, 2020).

While the beginnings of the women's movement both in the Philippines and Thailand may be traced back to the formation of women's associations and organizations in the early 1900s, gaining momentum with the resurgence of women's activism in the 1960s and 1970s, it is imperative to look back at earlier forms of women's struggles that inspired our women activists to mobilize and fight for their rights, not only as members of the women's movement but also as part of the people's movement. De Jesus (2021) articulated that the women's movement is a logical expression of oppression and exploitation embedded in society. For as long as these are present, there arises the logic for women to mobilize within the bigger sphere of the people's movement. Women's issues are not just gender-specific issues but are grounded upon comprehensive issues in society (de Jesus, 2021). Sinprasert (2021) meanwhile observed that current women activists tend to favor the term "gender issues" over "feminist issues" to avoid being

limited by this binary concept and noted that gender issues ought to be tackled in general. Although the term “feminist movement” is more popular than the term “women’s movement,” the former could be considered as part of the more comprehensive scope of the latter whose framework is based on social issues and goes beyond the issue of fighting for gender oppression (de Jesus, 2021). Buranajaroenkij (2021) also shared the same observation when she noted that some of her informants for a particular project claimed they do not see feminists in Thailand but rather champions for the movement’s agenda and not specifically for gender equality. In relation to this, Camagay (2021) notes that the term “feminist” has different meanings for different periods and that its use should be properly contextualized.

The status of women in society is generally considered a universal concern, but any discussion of it must be contextualized within the specificities of the culture and society under discussion. Southeast Asian countries are generally perceived by the West as places where women have an inferior status but a study of history or “herstory” reveals that women have played an important role in the culture and history of these countries. (Kintanar, 2008, pp. 53-54)

Despite varying socio-cultural conditions and colonial experiences, the women’s movement in the Philippines and Thailand followed a similar path. In both countries, the first women’s organizations were formed in the context of revolution and war in the late 19th century. By the turn of the 20th century, the women’s movement in Thailand focused on a campaign for social reforms which challenged patriarchy, polygyny, and polygamy while, in the Philippines, women shifted to a campaign for political reforms, as the first feminists fought for women’s suffrage. In the aftermath of World War II, women took on a more domesticated role in both countries. The 1970s then witnessed the rise of activism against military rule as Filipina and Thai women mobilized and confronted the social issues of the time. Indeed, the early stages in the development of the women’s movement in the Philippines and Thailand proved that, as long as there is oppression, the logic for women to mobilize and organize will arise.

Thus, in comparing the origins of the women's movement in the Philippines and Thailand using the transnational feminist approach, it is important to consider that, while patriarchy causes gender oppression, it affects women differently based on their geographic and social locations. This explains the distinctive development of the women's movement in the two ASEAN countries despite belonging to the same region. By looking at the progression of women's espousal of personal and public causes, one can chart the course of the history of women's struggles in Southeast Asia—in the Philippines and Thailand. It could be surmised, *prima facie*, that the Philippines and Thailand's experiences were analogous in terms of women's quest for social, political, and religious representation amidst antiquated patriarchal structures. However, one must delve beneath this apparent similarity to comprehend that the struggle of the women's movement in both societies was borne out of the unique dynamics of each.

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