

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Analysis of Neoliberalism and the Reconfiguration of Gender in the Thai Political Domain

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Abstract

In contemporary Thai politics, the rhetoric of “superwoman” (ผู้หญิงเก่ง) has gained prominence. This paper theorises the intersection of gender, politics, and neoliberalism within the Thai context. While neoliberalism reinforces precarity, it also fosters flexibility, empowerment, and autonomy for some. To understand the origins of the “superwoman” rhetoric, I employ a qualitative method that involves interviewing Thai women MPs who are in the Committee that oversees activities including children, young adults, women, elderly, persons with disabilities, ethnic groups, and gender diverse individuals (คณะกรรมการกิจการเด็ก เยาวชน สตรี ผู้สูงอายุ ผู้พิการ กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ และผู้ที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศ). It emerges that some women politicians embody neoliberal selves (Chen 2013), where the central neoliberal principle involves treating *homo economicus* as the model of personhood. Their bodily dispositions align with the pursuit of individual choices, led by entrepreneurial activity in a capitalist commodifying culture. I examine the interplay between neoliberalism and Thai women politicians as immanent neoliberal subjects who epitomise hegemonic femininity (Baer 2016; Chen 2013) while simultaneously working toward political changes. While literature on neoliberalism and gender focuses on how women distance themselves from the politics of the collective and unchanged structural inequalities, Thai women politicians embody and manoeuvre normative femininity (where opulence symbolises their agency) while also working toward mobilising political change.

Keywords: Women politician; Neoliberal feminine subject; Governance; Gender relations; Politics

Introduction

In the 2023 Thai general election, Paetongtarn Shinawatra rose to become the new leader of the Pheu Thai Party while Pita Limjaroenrat led the now-dissolved Move Forward Party to win the vast majority of seats in the House of Representatives. Many commended the victory, noting that the Move Forward Party had ascended exponentially following the progressive Party’s third-place finish in the 2019 general election. Apart from the controversial ideological distinctions between the two parties’ platforms, the most striking element of the election was the shift in relations between gender and politics. It is often presupposed that “Thai politics are highly male-dominated, and [that] women fare better in the Thai economic sector than they do in the political sphere” (Bjarnegård 2009: 132; Thananut Singhathep and Piriya Pholphirul 2015). Similarly, in a recent work by Sattar and Sanoh, the authors argue that “one significant obstacle to women’s political participation is the prevailing view and value system that associates political activity exclusively with males” (2024: 60). This statement seems correct as Global Gender Gap ranking of political empowerment, which includes “women in

parliament” and “women in ministerial positions,” places Thailand in 102nd place, and places Thailand 21st with regards to economic participation and the economy, out of 146 countries.¹

The historical context of women’s political participation also appears to align with the prevailing value system that dissociates women from politics. Although Thai women were granted equal rights with their male counterparts in the 1932 Constitution, it was not until 1949 that Thailand had its first woman MP. Three years later, in 1952, women began participating directly in politics at all levels. One year after the World Conference on women’s issues—during which the United Nations promoted equality between women and men, particularly in political participation with the goal of reaching 30 per cent representation (Orapin Sopchokchai 1998: 19)—women comprised only of 5.6 per cent of the Thai parliament. Thailand has joined numerous international efforts and commissions aimed at promoting gender equality, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, persistent obstacles—including economic constraints, political instability, social norms, and the lack of supportive networks—continued to hinder women’s political participation (Department of Women’s Affairs and Family Development 2008).

Historically, legal perspectives dating back before the 19th century viewed women as property. Combined with class-based education—emphasising credentials and serving industrial society stakeholders rather than fostering awareness or promoting gender equality (Women’s Power Committee 2012)—and ongoing political instability, particularly military coups since the 1970s, the environment has not encouraged women’s political engagement (Sirirat Tamrongterakul and Witchayanee Ocha 2021).

Chalidaporn Songsamphan (2006) argues that, beyond the binary gender lens and patriarchal structures that shape Thai social beliefs, the division between public and private spheres plays a crucial role in marginalising women in politics. This division sustains the notion that women belong in private, domestic roles, thereby excluding them from the public domain, including politics. As a result, political power and decision-making continued to be dominated by men. Meanwhile, women’s legal status has developed only gradually—and at times, has even been trivialised (2006: 53).

In the 21st century, gender and politics have intersected in a way that gender relations have recently been reconfigured. Near the end of the 2023 campaign trail, Paetongtarn’s pregnancy made both local and international headlines, for example, “Baby delivered, Thai PM candidate set to resume campaigning” in the *AP* (Jintamas Saksornchai 2023). Meanwhile, the *BBC* put a spotlight on Pita Limjaroenrat, a single father, as he held his daughter Pipim onstage at a political rally (Thanyarat Dokson and Kelly Ng 2023). While Paetongtarn and Pita were both prime minister candidates, the former is often portrayed as decisive and resolute in her speech and bodily comportment. The latter, best known for winning over Thai citizens’ hearts with his unwavering political ideologies by “pledg[ing] to amend Section 112” (McCready 2024), is usually described by the popular media as charismatic and a loving single father. This was amplified further by NewsClear YouTube channel (2023) in a video entitled “เปิดมุมมองน่ารัก ‘พिता’ กับ ‘ลูกสาว’ พ่อเลี้ยงเดี่ยวสุดอบอุ่น,” which translates as “A delightful story between Pita and daughter: a warm-hearted single father”.

As gendered images and gendered spaces have changed, the places and roles of women and men in politics are not clearly bifurcated. In the past, women politicians were expected to preserve their “femaleness” and not to “transgres[s] gender boundaries and expectations” (Fishel 2001: 275). Their visibility today speaks of a different kind of gendered image, one that is not biologically deterministic, i.e., a concept that sees “sex-linked behaviors and traits as essential properties of individuals” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 128). They rearrange “micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987: 126). Or put simply, they do gender differently. Likewise, in my conversation with the 2023 prime minister-elect, Pita stated that there should

¹World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Economy Profile of Thailand available at: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>.

no longer be boxes that categorise people based on gender and that the issues are beyond the gender binary, as he is a devoted single father himself.² Apart from Paetongtarn and Pita's attitudes toward gendered scripts, what these individuals share in common, in terms of self-representation, are bodily comportments that often bespeak opulence. Indeed, they both come from wealth.

Scholarly literature on women and politics concludes that to make inroads into politics, women need resources (Juree Vichit-Vadakan 2008; Nishizaki 2018; Sattar and Sahoh 2024; Supin Kachacupt 2008). These could be in forms of spousal and familial support (Juree Vichit-Vadakan 2008; Sukonta Thomson 1995; Supin Kachacupt 2008), consanguine ties, and conjugal relations (Nishizaki 2018). All of these would “‘ready’ [women] for the public role [and women] should not be poor or still struggling to get ahead” (Juree Vichit-Vadakan 2008: 148). Women politicians, both at the local and national levels, ought to have “economic resources [and] well-established status” for them to do politics (148). Socio-cultural expectations on their feminine roles are reiterated. Sattar and Sahoh further highlight that apart from feminine roles that hinder their entry into politics, “political systems that do not account for the participation of diverse social groups and non-democratic practices” are also significant impediments (2024: 71).

Due to political roadblocks, one of which involved Pita's alleged shareholdings in a media company, his path to becoming a prime minister was never successful. Paetongtarn Shinawatra is the new prime minister of Thailand as of August 2024.³ She is the second woman prime minister, following Yingluck Shinawatra, her aunt, whose tenure lasted three years before the *coup d'état* in 2014. Thai women have been involved in local politics since the 20th century. Although Katherine Bowie found that village level elections instituted in 1897 “under the Local Administrative Act” granted suffrage to women, “only men could serve as village heads or as subdistrict heads” (2008: 136-137). Moreover, Sheila Sukonta Thomson's study on Thai women in local politics shows that suffrage was granted to Siamese women and men in 1914 and in 1932 for national elections (1995: 17; Bowie 2008). A century later, Thailand, under a military junta led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, enacted the Gender Equality Act in 2015.⁴ However, the Act is not as effective for those who are prejudiced against—especially transgender individuals—because it is “invisible” (Sinen 2017), meaning those who wish to access this law must go through bureaucratic red tape to file a case. Amnesty International emphasises the “structural and systemic barriers [resulting in] legislative measures and social policies” (2024: 16) that act as a buttress to prosecuting gender non-normative and women activists through TfGBV or technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Despite the constitutional enforcement, women, LGBTQ+, and transgender people still encounter discrimination and violence concerning their “participatory behavior” (Guntarik and Trott 2016: 245) in politics and everyday lives.

“Patron-client relationships” (Sukonta Thomson 1995: 19), “clientelism” (Bjarnegård 2009: 19), or “patron-client model” (Fishel 2001: 249) keep elites' interests, structural barriers, and socio-cultural hindrances alive (Supin Kachacupt 2008: 224). According to existing literature, women must battle with clientelism or “the exchange of personal favors for political support” where male politicians “seek to socialize exclusively with men” when their politico-economic interests may be at stake (Bjarnegård 2009: 19-21). Fishel's study provides an interesting insight into how women also foster patron-client ties in local politics, with the emphasis on gendered aspects and political support that “in instances where husbands and wives are both actively cultivating patronage networks, ... certain subordinates invariably feel more closely tied to one person or the other, and gender appears to be one of the factors determining the strength of these loyalties” (2001: 253).

² A conversation with Pita Limjaroenrat at Ash Center for Democratic Governance, Harvard University, 16 October 2024.

³ As of 29 August 2025, the Constitutional Court has ruled to remove Paetongtarn from office, citing ethics violation on the grounds of her phone call with former Cambodian leader Hun Sen.

⁴ English version of the Gender Equality Act 2015 is accessible via Human Rights Watch's website at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/thailand-gender-equality-act>.

Both women and men take part in the cultivation of patron-client model, and Fishel asserts that just as men build this relation among men, women, too “build patron-client ties among women” (252). For the women engaged in local Thai politics, it is also important that they recognise problems intrinsic to women and that they do not maintain patriarchal dividends—the benefits that women may gain by maintaining ties with men in hegemonic position—that women have made in keeping ties with their male counterparts or acquaintances, which can perpetuate male chauvinism (Connell 2002).

From historical context to the present day, it can be argued that four main barriers have hindered women's political participation or discouraged them from pursuing it. These include economic investment and access to resources, the political situation, prevailing social norms, and the lack of supportive networks (Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development 2008). Current political dynamics mark a significant departure from past patterns, as seen in the case of Paetongtarn and Pita mentioned earlier. More importantly, persistent barriers—such as political turmoil—have not prevented women from entering the political arena. On the contrary, women MPs are motivated by a desire to contribute to meaningful change. Gendered norms that historically drew a rigid line between the public and private spheres have gradually evolved, making space for progressive and mindful actors to connect and form alliances—something less common in the past.

Indeed, 2024 saw a nineteen per cent increase in women in the parliament (Nishizaki 2024: 321). The increase is significant, as it moves closer to the goal set by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission at the end of the 20th century. From five per cent in 1996 to nineteen per cent in 2024, this trend reflects current dynamics that mark a departure from the rigid divide between the public and private spheres, as well as from a patriarchal social structure. These shifts are expected to gradually influence legal processes and decision-making. The women members of parliaments interviewed for this article come from diverse backgrounds, offering a counterpoint to Nishizaki's finding, as he contends that “historical continuity” of dynastic “female” politicians still exists (2024: 339–341). Four women MPs from the Committee that oversee activities involving children, young adults, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities, ethnic groups, and gender diverse individuals (hereafter the Committee) took part in in-depth interviews as part of the qualitative method, with some coming from the governing and some from the opposition party.⁵ Contrary to Nishizaki's recent work, which argues that “the Thai Parliament has taken on similar elitist characters, thanks in part to dynastic female politicians” (2024: 341), where “political families transfer parliamentary office from one member to another” (322), I propose that the study of women in politics should not focus too heavily on the Shinawatra family and those with other prominent surnames. The women MPs in this project are resolute in bettering the people's lives and committed to making legislation more potent for the people. The following analytical sections introduce themes of neoliberal women doing politics, their politics of coalition, and the reconfiguration of gender relations and the gendering of governance (Wade and Marx Ferree 2019: 362).

Contextualising Neoliberalism

In preparation for this project, I acquainted myself with each woman MP before conducting the interview. During one of my visits to the parliament, I learned that due to her commitment to making change, it was impossible for MP3 to assume a role as a political player (เล่นการเมือง). Instead, she set

⁵The Committee's website is accessible at: <https://web.parliament.go.th/view/109/รายนามกรรมการ/TH-TH>. The Committee's name in Thai is คณะกรรมาธิการกิจการเด็ก เยาวชน สตรี ผู้สูงอายุ ผู้พิการ กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ และผู้ที่มีความหลากหลายทางเพศ. The four women MPs' identities are kept anonymous, and pseudonyms will be: MP1, MP2, MP3, and MP4. MP1 is from Chiang Mai province, MP2 and MP4 are from Ubon Ratchathani province, and MP3's constituent area is in Bangkok. This research project was approved by Chulalongkorn University's Research Ethics Review System for Research Involving Human Participants. Every conversation with each MP included ten basic questions that included: why did they choose to do politics; what are some obstacles they encountered as women MPs; their responsibilities in the Committee; and their thoughts on the numbers and the positions they see women politicians may hold in the future.

out to be a doer of change, choosing to do politics (ทำการเมือง). In my visit to the headquarters of another MP's political party, over the course of the three-hour talk at a ground-floor coffee shop, a crowd of polite and rather young women gathered to observe. As I concluded my meeting with MP2, the crowd was still taking photos and video-recording the MP's bodily movements. And when I got up to leave, a young lady from the crowd rushed to MP2 and presented her with her GPA. It appeared that the young lady was a part of a sturdy support base for the party's women MPs. MP2 turned to tell me that some of them frequently join her and her team for their provincial visits (ลงพื้นที่ที่ต่างจังหวัด). I learned that some of these MPs have a fan club that manages social media accounts on TikTok and Instagram to support their favourite MPs.

Recently, we have seen rhetoric about “superwomen” (ผู้หญิงเก่ง), efficient and good-looking women politicians, who make up the women's army (ทัพสตรี), a term newly coined to convey their political clout.⁶ From Pannika (Chor) Wanich of the dissolved Future Forward Party to the current prime minister's office minister, Jiraporn (Nam) Sindhuprai, women politicians have been associated with both capability and aesthetic appearance. Their elegance is evident in the fashionable stylisation of their bodies with designer attire such as clutches from high-end brands.⁷ Social media platforms from YouTube to Instagram spotlight how women MPs are the pristine form of the neoliberal self, personifying class, credibility, and aesthetic vision. On countless occasions in my visits to the parliament and party headquarters for the interview sessions, I observed luxury brands they donned on their wrists and wore on their bodies. Most women MPs exemplify opulence and splendour, immaculate from their hairstyles, eyelash extensions, and high-heeled shoes.

It is in this sense that I emphasise neoliberalism intersects with gender in a number of ways. In this project, I will outline the general understanding of neoliberalism and how it has been applied in the Thai context. Next I discuss how neoliberalism converges with gender through, first, a form of “neoliberal governmentality” that incites a new form of economic subject embodied by women MPs who can be seen as neoliberal subjects par excellence, and second, how neoliberal political establishment arbitrates with “contemporary work cultures” that produce depoliticised vulnerable labours and precarised work, emphasising individualism rather than connection to the wider social structure (Ikonen 2013; Oksala 2011: 108; Scharff 2016: 217).

Neoliberalism, as a set of principles, shapes the state and its policy-making processes, thereby prescribing a distinctive form of labour and a particular conception of personhood within the neoliberal economic framework. In Western capitalist economies, neoliberal principles are macroeconomic policies that emphasise liberalisation, where economic and financial activities can take place without many constraints. Deregulation and privatisation, where state-controlled domains are transferred to public assets, are key elements. In a word, neoliberalism espouses key ideas such as freedom, self-responsibility, privatisation, and the consolidation of capitalist power. In its trajectory into Thailand, however, neoliberalism did not arrive as a whole package. Instead, it established “the cornerstone of capitalism” with “varying degrees of dirigiste and technocratic-managerial tendencies” (Khoo 2010: 3–4). Kevin Hewison describes it as “an increase of domestic protectionism” (Hewison cited in Tausig 2014: 264). As a result, neoliberalism in Thailand was selective in terms of policies and measures that were “favourable to domestic capital” (Khoo 2010: 6).

Furthermore, the employment of neoliberal principles arbitrates work culture in a contradictory manner that is both “exhilarating and terrifying” (McGuigan 2014: 235). Affected by neoliberal policies, the Thai state “was complicit in expropriation, exploitation, and discrimination” (Khoo 2010: 11), and neoliberalism ended up exacerbating class disparities, idealising individual freedom and agency, and tasking individuals with being accountable through the “distribut[ion of] responsibility and risk

⁶The INNNEWS's headline of a YouTube video following the general election in 2023 is “Five new women MPs from Isan [northeastern Thailand] to join women's army with Oonging and Pheu Thai” (5 สาวลูกอีสาน ส.ส.ป้ายแดง ทัพสตรี “สู้อีจิง” เพื่อไทย) posted on 16 June 2023. Accessible via: https://youtu.be/N57QNkXcNM0?si=7rr-X3BoLncH4_Kw.

⁷Chor made headlines when she wore a “hi-so fashion suit” by the Thai brand POEM to the parliament in 2019. It was during the mourning period that women had been instructed to wear all black (Mae Moo 2019).

(Gershon 2011: 540). Neoliberalism in Thai context is thus perceived as a “malaise” where David Harvey, who asserts that neoliberalism is “a class project ... towards the restoration and consolidation of class power” (Harvey cited in Khoo 2010: 3).

Under neoliberal principles, the ideal neoliberal subject or entrepreneurial self, as Scharff uses interchangeably, should seek human capital or maximise capital and (non)monetary gains; in short, *homo economicus* (Chen 2013: 444; Oksala 2011: 110; Scharff 2016: 218). Guided by neoliberal governance, *homo economicus* is presumed to be a model of economic personhood. Subjects are called upon to become “a consumer and an entrepreneur” (Oksala 2011: 110). They are encouraged to pursue “economic incentives provided by the free market ... [that] will therefore automatically bring about maximal efficiency, wellbeing and wealth” (Oksala 2011: 111). This encouragement to realise the quixotic “enterprising” self (Houghton 2019: 620) is accompanied by ideas such as self-optimisation, personal responsibility, individual choice, and the utilisation of bodies as sites for identity construction, control, and empowerment, especially amongst women (Baer 2016: 19).

Labour, work, and ideal personhood under neoliberal regime can thus cultivate both precarity and potential for change, or what Baer terms as “paradox” under neoliberal principles and values (2016: 21). Insecurity, precarious labour, and vulnerability could emerge because the focus is shifted to an individual’s efforts to self-manage, self-master, which makes “the organization of society around a multiplicity of individual enterprises profoundly depoliticized social and political relations” (McNay cited in Scharff 2016: 221). Successful entrepreneurship or failure to be self-reliant and self-autonomous is viewed as “individualized” and very much “limited to individual acts” (Scharff 2016: 222). By disconnecting analysis from structural constraints, all of this serves to aggravate class division. Neoliberalism, when intersected with gender, manifests uniquely in the political domain. As political actors embody *homo economicus*—the ideal economic personhood—the effort to construct a politically credible self reproduces normative gendered dispositions. Yet, at the same time, these actors navigate their paths to political success by both accommodating gendered patterns and critiquing structural inequalities.

Neoliberal Women Doing Politics

In early October 2024, Chiang Mai and its surrounding provinces in northern Thailand were severely affected by flooding. Some said it was the worst seen in the past fifty years. MP1 recalls the story of when locals requested that she bring in a water pump to reduce the water level. MP1, stressed and challenged by such a demand, wondered, “What do I do? If I asked people to help, the least I can provide them is free meals; otherwise, who would want to help?” She added that “I don’t have the money. One meal with utensils costs at least 30 baht, plus plastic bags to organise them. When we ask for more people to help, we must pay them, right?” (Interview with MP1 2024). The MP and the locals knew that there was no way the mayor and the governor were going to bring in the water pump. MP1 felt accountable for resolving the situation and alleviating the torrents in the area, so she took this responsibility upon herself. She secured a water pump through an offer from her friend from Samut Sakhon province. As we were talking, I could sense her visible relief as she told me that because of the water pump, *salim* (สลิ่ม),⁸ praised her. By exhausting her resources and connections, she in turn received approval from her constituents and opponents.

MP1 and her team managed this crisis independently. When it appeared she might fail (or even be slow in its resolution), complaints and criticism were addressed towards her, which affected her mental state as she felt “paranoid.” When she succeeded, relief washed over her, but she also knew that this was only momentary as more downpours were to come. She and her team alone would bear any uproar from the locals. She wearily said, “I am one person, and there are only eight other people

⁸Thai slang used to refer to skeptics who are anti-democracy and supportive of the institutions, specifically the military.

on my team. We all receive the same salaries. We oversee many municipalities and villages; it really is exhausting. Securing the water pump saved my life this time” (Interview with MP1 2024).

For MP1, saving the area became an individual act expected of an MP. We see here the elements of precarity as the state’s role is visibly downplayed. Keeping the tone of the interview depoliticised, the MP emphasised the emotional toll of solving the issue and gaining esteem from the locals. MP1 did not mention the resources that the state could have supplied when the locals’ criticisms were at their peak. MP1 admitted that she “could not sleep” nor could she “handle the comments” on her Facebook page (Interview with MP1 2024). She then seized the opportunity to publicise the arrival of the water pump on her platform, after which complaints dwindled. In this situation, the MP had the mobility to take action rather than waiting on the state.

Another feature of neoliberalism is that it encourages individuals to seek human capital, considered *beau idéal*, under neoliberal governance. Every woman MP interviewed agrees that political image is important for their profession. As I paid my visits to parliament for the interviews, a notable feeling of being out of place swamped me on each occasion. Entering and trying to navigate the buildings, unsure of which direction I was supposed to go, impropriety swept through my body. Though I, too, was in my work attire, everywhere I turned, almost everyone else was wearing a pristine suit. This bodily disposition is another aspect of parliamentary politics, especially for women.

MP3 spoke to me about resources and beauty standards, claiming that “the media expects [women] politicians to have no wrinkles, no creases, to be bodily fit, firm, young, and beautiful. Not only does the media expect this from us, but the society as well. . . . Somebody asked me ‘You’re not wearing makeup today?’ on the day I didn’t wear makeup and I got this comment, ‘You look worn out today’” (Interview with MP3 2024). Beauty standards come with “inequalities,” and our attires symbolise “classism,” MP3 added. Our conversation followed Thailand’s soft power campaign to elevate Thai silk, begun in 2022. As MP3 cynically puts it, “Not every woman MP needs to always wear silk. Each type of silk has its own grading. If you want to be heard in parliament, be a woman MP with progressive ideas” (Interview with MP3 2024). Bodily stylisation becomes an individual’s project, with a cost, to achieving the entrepreneurial self.

Certainly, resources are important in developing human capital. Not every woman MP can attain the ideal level of economic personhood, exercise their choices with free consumption, and enjoy their “normative power” (Chen 2013: 441). MP1 claims, “those who have money can have a head start in transforming their bodies” (Interview with MP1 2024). And indeed, MP2 partakes in the normative beauty regimen offered by the market to realise the ideal or “hegemonic femininity” imperative to winning votes and for her profession as an MP (Baer 2016: 24). From observing MP2’s and MP4’s social media platforms on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, it is evident that they embody entrepreneurial feminine selves. Premium brands adorn their bodies, on one part or another. Sometimes their style stands out against the muddy pavements during their fieldwork, at other times, their lustrous timepiece sets a contrast when handing out free water to villagers. Though they are adorned with designer brands, they treat their constituents as equals. They are commonly seen speaking in the local dialects, giving hugs, and doing the Thai-style dance (รำวง) at events.

Political images may be a matter of individual taste, but surely, these women embody the perfect form of neoliberal subject where “choice is prescribed by normative culture, . . . by patriarchy and capitalism” (Baer 2016: 443). They are free to achieve the look deemed credible by the public. However, MP2 clarifies, “Let me tell you this, my clothes and facial maintenance cost a lot! Botox, thread lift, seriously, the ministry of public health should provide thermage (skin-tightening treatments) in every village” (Interview with MP2 2024).

MP2 knows how to carry her neoliberal self in the Thai context, works towards achieving this ideal, and recognises that she can manoeuvre her agency with a quintessential appearance as expected by the local constituents.

To put it simply, to portray an excellent image is mandatory. I invest in the makeup process. I hired a professional makeup artist who cost about 20,000 baht. That was for my campaign. Why did I invest in that? Images affect our potential voters: whether they will or will not vote for me. To get the picture, in my district, there are more than 106,000 constituents, and not everyone has met me or learned about what I have done in the area. To me, image is the most important. We have to look pristine and wear immaculate clothes that are also fit for time and place (*kalatesa*).⁹ The second most crucial for a woman politician is speech. That comes after our bodily presentation and comportment. A politician may be just a regular person, going about their day-to-day business with no makeup, but trust me, my people in the villages don't think like that. Say, if your face is not well made up, no lipstick on, you don't put on good clothes, what does that say about how are you to care for your people?

(Interview with MP2 2024)

Human capital can be achieved with individual effort. MP2 said as much: that bodily stylisation and aesthetic appearance are independent choices and subject to individual taste. But close contemplation shows that choice is still dependent on the societal notions around beauty regimens (read: anti-aging, fair skin, and standardised body shapes). This makes the notion of liberation unique under neoliberal governance. Choice becomes “not freedom from want but freedom from passivity, and to be free is to exercise one's power to influence and be influenced by others” (Chen 2013: 443).

Upon closer examination of the four women MPs' social media platforms and interviews, commonalities can be found.¹⁰ When political images are presented in parliament or on their Facebook banners, made-up faces, elegant clothing and hairstyle, and stylish ornaments can be seen on their bodies. When they are doing fieldwork, the styles they choose to wear change depending on *kalatesa* when going to the rice paddies, visiting flooded areas, or attending funerals, for instance. Though appropriate for the time and place, sophisticated brands always embellish MP2 and MP4's appearance. The neoliberal self, as embodied by the MPs, can perpetuate class differences, especially among the MPs themselves.

It is true that MPs may feel more empowered to mobilise and steer their political tasks when they embody their human capital. By doing so, “normative expectations” are reiterated (Cornwall *et al.* 2008: 3). Under the influence of current beauty regimens, this may end in distancing themselves from “political insight and only intensifying normative practices” (Oksala 2011: 118). MP1 and MP3 realise that by transforming themselves to achieve their human capital, especially as women in the political domain, where their bodies have long been viewed as objects of inspection, they are incited to dress and carry themselves according to the politico-cultural compulsion at times. MP3 added, however, that I must “fight the beauty standards” (Interview with MP3 2024).

During the interview, MP3 made it explicitly clear that although we may be encouraged to exercise our choice and participate in consumption to better ourselves, what we cannot forget is that not everybody has access to self-transformation. This is where precarity emerges. For those who may be incited to transform but lack the resources, how do they perceive the barriers? This is especially true when women MPs are often role models for the public. In MP3's words, she mentioned that “looking good is your right, your satisfaction. But never forget to speak for those who have no resources, no access to things that they want. Beauty standards have its own darkness”. To her, she believes that she must “speak for the people . . . otherwise, we shouldn't be receiving a salary from the people's taxes. The people are our employers, and we ought to represent them” (Interview with MP3 2024).

This section has explained the trend among women MPs, some of whom exhibit clear characteristics of neoliberal feminine selves, of exercising freedom to realise their best enterprising selves.

⁹ A Thai concept *kalatesa* denotes appropriateness and suitability where the context is most important for Thais (van Esterik 2000: 36).

¹⁰ Two of which were scenes from the local gathering with the civil servants in Ubon Ratchathani, and another was when the MP was at parliament.

Others may wish to do this, but know that they lack resources. They all agree that embarking on self-transformation to adhere closely to the norm, or what I term capitalistic semblance, is an individual choice essential to attaining the normative *modus operandi* of being seen as a respected and trustworthy person in the political domain.¹¹ They take this matter on self-transformation into their own hands, where “structural constraints are elided and the capable, self-mastering neoliberal subject is reinstated” through terms like “it’s your own right” or “choice” (Scharff 2016: 222).

In terms of insecurity and precarity that characterise work under neoliberalism, MP1 has deeply experienced the paradox of neoliberal governance both financially and emotionally. While acknowledging that images (ภาพลักษณ์) matter, MP4 hopes that society, and especially traditional media, would “focus on her will and ambition to work, though I appreciate that the media praises me as beautiful. It’s very flattering. This praise can become a prejudice when addressed by the opposition. They may look at my appearance and may demote my abilities. So, sayings like ‘superwomen who are both beautiful and capable’ (สวยและเก่ง) can end up being harmful” (Interview with MP4 2024). Moreover, this section has shown that there is a disparity in terms of class and accessibility to attaining the ideal neoliberal self. Also, it shows how one’s labour can be precarious without resources. It appears that the choice to engage with the neoliberal self—deemed ideal under neoliberal logic—is conditioned by capital. This choice, which some MPs aspire to pursue, is contingent upon both gender and class. While gendered norms may vary over time with respect to aesthetics, class-based embodiment in politics—achieving a politically credible self-endowed with capital—is shaped by the regulatory constraints of neoliberal governance. Women MPs indeed exhibit neoliberal feminine subjects carefully crafted to suit each context, *kalatesa*, when they can and where they can.

Politics of Coalition

There is scholarly apprehension about the intersection of neoliberal governmentality with gender in that the pair might camouflage structural power disparity, patriarchal structure, and economic exploitation (Baer 2016: 20; Cornwall *et al.* 2008: 2; Lieu 2013: 38; Oksala 2011: 117; Scharff 2016: 221). I argue that the choice, freedom, and agency that may lead to the “reduction of political to the personal” (Baer 2016: 30) is not applicable in the local Thai context. Though every woman MP recognises political gains and social acceptance, they may benefit from justifying their normative choices, which may bring political gain and social acceptance, showing that they are committed to making policy changes and bettering people’s lives. Their engagement with the normative bodily project is rarely solipsistic, especially for MP3.

Nevertheless, the dedication to making policies more effective and working better for the people is not shared by every MP. MP1 emphasises that there are two types of superwomen in the political domain: one who is both an eye-ful and informative, and the other who lacks the latter characteristic.

For me, there are two types of superwomen—beautiful and capable. Take Khun Chor Pannikar, Deer Khattiya Sawasdi-pol, or the Deputy Minister of Interior, Teerarat Samrejvanich, for example. These individuals are sharp and informed. They are always accurate with the facts. But there are many other women MPs who simply do not know anything, even some from my own party. They are just there looking pretty... Though there are penance for being a woman in politics. There are high expectations for us. Even if you put out 90%, the society can always find ways to criticise the remaining 10% as subaverage.¹²

(Interview with MP1 2024)

¹¹On precarity that comes with neoliberal principles, MP1 asserts that “I don’t really have the means, you know, to wear brand names all the time. The watch, shoes, and nice cars. Not to mention when the villagers ask for water for their event, that could cost 6,000 to 12,000 baht in a day. What I can do is to dress nice, I guess... Especially, when I visit the municipality, slack pants are a must and no jeans” (Interview with MP1 2024).

¹²The exact word that MP1 and MP3 use numerous times is *bong* (บึ้ง), which is a slang term that can be used in many situations to mean failed, unexpected, not as planned, destroyed, etc.

The MPs have slightly different views about the way the Committee has been formed. Because it includes “too many groups” of people, the sheer number of various social categories ends up curbing the Committee’s output. MP1 states that the Committee has been debating the definition of ethnicities to the extent that they could not form a subcommittee to move forward. MP1’s own concern about young children living in overcrowded communities may have been impeded by “committee members’ interests” and existing solutions, i.e., by distribution of largesse or structural welfare benefits. MP1 explains:

There are so many appeals, from various groups. When the committee members are not into some issues, there is no going forward . . . How are we to solve any petition? Do we give them a thousand baht and be done with it? The Committee’s work all depends on how the members see things; if giving through benevolence is ineffective in cases with a large amount of people, then maybe the Committee needs a long-term solution.

(Interview with MP1 2024)

Each of the MPs has different concerns within the Committee. MP2 is very serious about assisting women with disabilities and has been working closely with a subcommittee to study employment and funding for persons with disabilities, demonstrating how MP2 seeks to empower, rather than merely sympathise with, this group.¹³ MP3 is resolute in bettering the lives of women and young women, beseeching the Committee on health care issues such as education on bodies and reproductive rights, and access to breastfeeding rooms, sanitary napkins, maternity leave, and menstruation leave. Some male MPs disagree with raising issues concerning the biological sexes. Making achievements in these areas through the Committee is a challenging task, according to MP3 and MP1, as the committee members’ interests weigh heavily in whether a certain issue can be moved forward. Much like MP1, MP3 believes that using charity work as a means to solve an issue is an idle antidote.

I have to speak out and speak loudly as a committee member on policies regarding mothers, children, and sexual harassment. These have never been systematically considered. You know MSDHS offers a 1300 hotline, but from my fieldworks, people rarely know about this. . . . I always emphasise that women’s issues should not be about the culture of charity. We often see images of many associations. Let me give you an example: a group of hair-up, silk-cladded women coming together to make donations. Our country will never change if this culture of charity continues. There is no going forward by just giving. Philanthropy will not change anything.

(Interview with MP3 2024).

The women MPs never elide any political concerns. All of them embody neoliberal feminine subjects to varying degrees while experiencing the uncertainties that come with neoliberal work differently. As I have shown in the previous section, precarity and opportunity are often intertwined with neoliberalism. All four MPs spoke about their dedication to achieving legislative change. They work together in the Committee without separation between the governing party and the opposition party, according to MP2. At stake is what matters in the outputs. Because the Committee oversees diverse social groups, any variation can produce unpredictable, if not lethargic, outputs despite the MPs’ determination.¹⁴ They can petition for a motion within the Committee, establish a subcommittee, and present

¹³MP2 has been coordinating with both Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) on the employment of persons with disabilities. She mentioned specifically that the subcommittee has already queued up to present its findings to parliament. Their goal is that eventually, all persons with disabilities can have the welfare benefits they are entitled to. She claimed that MSDHS and the cabinet will soon pass legislation in support of this issue.

¹⁴MP1 clarifies that “getting anything done within the Committee is not easy. There are processes. I feel that this Committee does not help that much. . . . Every Committee is tasked with studying and researching about a specific group, . . . Sometimes it involves too many parties. Problems about children in overcrowded communities involve the police bureau, Ministry of Education, and detention center, for instance. . . . The ‘researching’ part takes forever. Sometimes we know what the solution

findings in parliament on various social groups. I believe that eventually, all social groups would be considered, though priority really depends on the Committee's interests and what they deem as urgent. The downside of competing interests is that the pace of moving any motion forward can be time-consuming.

The coalition of women MPs indeed attests to bettering the people's lives, especially those who are vulnerable in Thai society, some of whom deliberately manoeuvre the neoliberal feminine self to coordinate with other ministries such as MSDHS and Ministry of Labour to consider the motions, and in turn, receive budget allocation to execute a certain plan. MP2 successfully did this. She emphasises that after speaking at parliament, it was her job to follow up with the ministers, simply by urging them, "Dear sir, would you please take a closer look at this?" (Interview with MP2 2024). MP2 self-manages the accountability she holds to "associat[e] with forms of collective action that involve possibilities of social transformation" (Cornwall *et al.* 2008: 8) for the benefit of the people, especially those who are in her constituent areas and are under the Committee's responsibility. Her means of realising the goal are first to work together within the Committee, and then to make sure that she efficiently coordinates (ประสาน) on her own, which is what she often highlights as part of her responsibility as an MP.

The heart of their alliance lies in one word, the people; however, their methods vary. MP1 and MP3 realise that human capital is a privilege, and share a preferred modality for work and lobbying. This includes being well informed of the people's desires and having accurate information, as well as maintaining bodily presentation. They also underscore structural impediments by criticising the statist budget allocation and discursive formation regarding reproductive rights, which are always deprioritised. MP1 criticises short-term solutions (in particular, donating money) while MP3 adamantly calls for breastfeeding rooms to be included in the Thailand Building Control Act. MP1 and MP3 make sure that the people's needs are met through changes in policy, and they reconsider the structural inequalities that make people vulnerable. They also know that any failure will result in outbursts on their social media platforms, yet they never depoliticise the issues. While embodying neoliberalism allows them to be autonomous in mobilising their human capital and knowledge, they also contextualise their tasks according to "wider social factors, such as work conditions" (Scharff 2016: 223), ensuring that solutions ought to come from both themselves and the state.

Moreover, the *modus operandi* to bridge politics outside and within parliament is shared by women MPs, and that bridge is the MPs themselves. MP2 and MP4 highlight that it is through their coalition that the people's needs are met. MP4 emphasises her perseverance. Her tenacity and constant service to the people in her constituent areas led her to win a seat in parliament, despite being one of the youngest to run for office. Much like MP4, MP2 firmly believes that her amicable character eases the communications between the villagers and herself. She claims, "You can't work alone as an MP," and what she sets forth to do is exactly that, to be a bridge first, listening to the people's hardships, and, second, being a mediator who lobbies outside parliament (Interview with MP2 2024). It is rare for MP2 and MP4 to comment on the neoliberal political structures that may hinder their political potency. Their staunch commitment to helping their people relies on their (and their connections) abilities to be self-efficient and self-authoring neoliberal subjects.

Having women in legislation is indeed important (Blackburn 2015: 196). As I have made clear, the women MPs on the Committee have the power to move things forward in order to materialise legislative output. As MP2 states, the subcommittee for persons with disabilities regarding funding and employment has already been passed. What is important to keep in mind is that their tasks and responsibilities in overseeing such a diverse group in the Committee must be contextualised under neoliberal governance. Questions such as why are there no budget provisions for female-related matters? Why do we need to reconsider adding these nuances (namely, menstruation leave

is, we have suggestions that we propose to the ministries, but then we don't know if they will utilise our findings. Sometimes, it feels like a waste for me" (Interview with MP1 2024).

or breastfeeding rooms) within existing legislative acts? All of these are a part of the wider social structure, a remnant of male legislative legacy, and I contend that despite taking individual responsibility as an MP and as representative of their constituents, legislative outputs are politicised due to structural constraints that are male-dominated and heightened capitalism. Nonetheless, the presence of women MPs in the legislative domain is significant, as it offers insight into the lived experiences shaped by the intersections of gender, class, and normative bodily capacity—experiences that have rarely, if ever, been so present in Thailand’s legislative history. As it appears, while there has been progress, there is still much work to be done collectively.

Reconfiguration of Gender in the Thai Political Domain

Making achievements in the Committee can be challenging. Half of the interviewees focus on structural changes and treat many issues as political. The other half uses their individual effort to discreetly assist the people and mediate the politics between inside and outside of parliament. By recognising that people’s lives are part and parcel of the political structure, MP2 and MP4 rarely admonish the government, but put emphasis on accumulating their human capital in terms of skill to coordinate and to serve, all of which caters to their entrepreneurship and respectability. Despite this divergence in approach, changes can be measured.

Thai women MPs today are resolute in helping the people by vouching for changes in legislation. The sheer amount of accord and respectability they receive is reflected in how they do politics to better the people’s lives as well.¹⁵ All the women MPs stated that their entry to the Committee is based on their eagerness to study further and to help marginalised groups of people. MP2 and MP3 have been working with Thai women empowerment groups in Ubon Ratchathani and the National Council of Women of Thailand, respectively. Their keenness to work with peripheral groups is evident during their interviews. MP1 and MP3 state that they do not have a preference for one *phet*¹⁶ (sex/gender) over another, but that the Committee ought to work towards “gender justice” (Interview with MP3 2024).

Gendered notions towards Thai politics shift entirely when we move our focus away from influential political families. I find that the gender of governance and gender relations have shifted their trajectory away from patriarchal structure, though gradually but firmly. More than half of the committee members are women, along with one openly self-identified queer MP, which shows that the gender of governance is shifting. People in governance, understood as those who have the power to advocate and make decisions, enforce the regulations and laws, and safeguard the state’s responsibility to the people (Wade and Marx Ferree 2019: 362). Gender and governance are closely intertwined, and “the governance of gender: how the gender of residents shapes the way they are regulated. . . . gender of governance: who holds political office and whether it matters” (362–363). Many of the current legal acts were formed by men, claims MP3. Some acts, such as the Thailand Building Control Act, do not benefit marginalised groups. MP3 passionately criticises the outdated and exclusionary features of this act and works toward amending it by adding breastfeeding rooms and campaigning for basic female necessities, including sanitary napkins. Having a variety of *phet* in the Committee reconfigures how the Thai state “enforce[s] gender ideologies in deciding how many and which gender categories to recognize,” a labour that is not only physical, but also emotional and ideological (Wade and Marx Ferree 2019: 363). MP3 states that:

¹⁵MP4 knows that sometimes, she has to be sharp about timing. She refers to the government’s subsidy scheme to help rice farmers in 2024 that “it’s not that we are hiding the truth [about harvesting cost], but it’s not the time to tell them. Eventually, they will find out that they won’t receive any rice harvesting costs this year” (Interview with MP4 2024). She emphasises that we can always choose when and what, especially what may displease the people (จิตใจประชาชน).

¹⁶The Thai term *phet* refers to the amalgamation between biological sex, gender, and sexuality. It has nuances and should be conceptualised based on the Thai term. Jackson and Cook (1999) use slash (/) to mark “ambiguity” in translating the term into English (1999: 4). Similarly, Ojanen translates *phet* as “gender and sexuality” (2012: xv).

There are obstacles for women MPs. First, because of the ratio. Though we make up around eighteen to nineteen per cent, we are still below ASEAN average of 25%. . . . I'm not saying that other politicians do not understand, some do. But this is work that involves implanting ideas (ทำงานทางความคิด) to have them understand what we are working towards. For example, some men may not agree with how women are vocal and "woke."¹⁷ They may just neglect sexual harassment issue and say, "This is the way it is," or they may emphasise that politics is still a "male domain". There really are some who still think this way. . . . Some may ask why do we need breastfeeding rooms? It is a waste of provisions. . . . Some still think that menstrual leave is a myth where women do not want to work and do other things. You know, real men (ชายแท้) said this to my face. . . . Some privilege economic policies over policies about *phet*, not seeing that it's urgent. Even the current cabinet's policy statement. . . . We can see so clearly that the temperature in the parliament is male dominated.

(Interview with MP3 2024)

From this quote, it can be understood that there is a transformation underway in the Thai political domain. Gender arrangements that traditionally place men as more dominant in politics to sustain patriarchal structures are under challenge. To do politics is not exclusively male or masculine. The women MPs express that there were things that they could do to change Thai politics despite acknowledging the imbalanced ratio between the two *phet*. MP1 entered into politics because she believed the structures (โครงสร้าง) were changeable and could become more democratic. MP3 shares this mentality of changing the structures at the roots of many inequalities, especially in terms of distribution. MP1 and MP3 are both discontent with the way politics has been done, and the progressive parties inspire them to do politics (ทำการเมือง) in order to make changes. MP2 and MP4 come from families with resources, but both were proactive and action-oriented with their constituents in Ubon Ratchathani.¹⁸ It was evident in my interview with MP2, who transported me via Zoom to her opening remarks at the local gathering. From the conversations she had with the people at the event, I observed a sense of respectability, affinity, and camaraderie. The way she incited people to continue to work together to better the local area was a key takeaway of her vivacious speech. It was clear that a bond was there, and it was strong. As she claimed, "for me, to do politics means no profits. The profits for me are the people's (พ่อแม่พี่น้อง) happiness. In terms of money, there are always losses" (Interview with MP2 2024). MP2 has a total of sixteen years of experience, and in her words, "It took time for them to love and have faith (ความรักและศรัทธา) in me. It took time for me to gain respect. I worked and proved it to them. The locals don't need much. All we need to do is work for them to make their wants and desires materialise" (Interview with MP2 2024).

In addition to the reconfiguration of gender of governance, power is being contested and transformed. Power relations within Thai politics are hardly *de facto* patriarchal. In my conversation with Pita, he said as much. Nowadays, older male politicians are being educated about using correct pronouns to address women politicians and have learned about the differences between sexual predation, harassment, and assault. In fact, some parties are working on a manual geared towards reducing gender biases. This is to accompany the shift in the increasing number of younger members and politicians with various *phet*. The *de jure* facet, on the other hand, is dominated by male individuals, and the challenge lies in how "the institutionalization of power relations is bureaucracies" (Connell 2002: 58). I believe that on the interactional and practical levels, power relations are scarcely patriarchal. According to Connell, "to give a full account of power relations requires an account of the

¹⁷MP3 uses this exact term during the interview. Thai people spell and use the word "woke" in English and retain the meaning from its English origin, that is, to be conscious and to be mindful of a certain issue.

¹⁸MP2's family comes from an agricultural background, but her father upskilled (อัปสกีล) from working in a sweets factory to becoming an entrepreneur in the sweets business. Nowadays, her family exports, wholesales, and retails the sweets from their factory. MP4 comes from a political family. Her father is a well-known MP, and her mother is in local politics where she is also an Ubon Ratchatani province council member.

way power is contested, and countervailing power is mobilized. Total domination is extremely rare... Gendered power is no more total than other kinds" (2002: 59), and indeed, MP3 was a prime example of how she defies the current structure. During the interview, she insisted that "I am a politician and it's my job to guide (ชี้แนะ) and provide solutions in this fast-changing society" (Interview with MP3 2024).

Apart from the reconfiguration of gendered power in Thai politics, access to resources is another factor that may condition political actors' participation in formal politics. MP1 has reiterated that without much budget, it is difficult for her to execute projects, take actions, or even help the locals in her area. MP2 mentioned during our conversation that her spending on the locals' needs exceeds her budget. For instance, in the course of a day, there could be a few funerals going on, and if the locals phone her to ask for supplies of water, she provides. Those who have the means could meet the material and monetary needs of their constituents without needing to bear the effects of neoliberal governmentality. However, in MP1's case, she is left feeling the accountability for her impotence. One way or another, the MPs all work for their people, engaging in politics to drive change and create effective policies. The main difference lies in their methods.

The women MPs do not find their *phet* as women an obstacle (การทำงานที่นักการเมืองหญิงมีอุปสรรคหรือไม่). Contrary to the notions seen in earlier studies, the women MPs rarely mention their significant others, showing their motivation and independence through their careers instead. MP1 adamantly states that "I don't feel any sense of inferiority compared to men. . . . I am capable and I am very well informed. . . . The only obstacle I see is visiting the sites at night. That is an issue of safety" (Interview with MP1 2024). MP2 chose to talk to me about opportunities (เอาโอกาสดีกว่าไหม) instead of obstacles: "My two pregnancies took place when I was the council member. My family is my main supporter, that's why I don't see femininity (ความเป็นผู้หญิง) in politics as an obstacle. . . . sometimes though, people gossip about how we got here, saying that we were mistresses, but that's not a problem for me. I am here by right" (Interview with MP2 2024). MP3 asserts that changing the mentality of some politicians and the unbalanced ratio becomes more of a challenge than their *phet*. Despite her age and her status as a woman politician, MP4 sees her femininity as an advantage, if one knows how to make use of it. She says:

Being a woman politician is beneficial. An MP needs to be accessible, right? Those who are more accessible have more advantages. I can manoeuvre my femininity to get in touch with everyone, women, men, elders, young ones. I am not shy in approaching anybody. . . . Our femininity is malleable and pliable (ความเป็นผู้หญิงของเรามันอ่อนไหวได้ มันพลิ้วได้) . . . if you know how to use it.

(Interview with MP4 2024)

A newly configured notion about women in politics focuses on their calibre (ความสามารถ), which is evident in how these MPs are proficient in manoeuvring their feminine qualities to do politics and to coordinate with many parties and individuals. For example, MP2 and MP4 know that to know *kalatesa* is important, and they become compliant when necessary. When they do fieldwork or meet with villagers, apart from paying respect through *wai* (Thai greeting), exchanges of hugs are common as it shows accessibility and rapport. They both mentioned that this would be much more difficult as a man.

Another way women's attachment deviates from femininity in the political field is through their acumen in doing politics for the people. The language they use and their bodily comportments during the interviews visibly demonstrate empowerment, though they do not put emphasis on that term. They are all here to serve, to make changes legislatively, and, for some, to be the people's watchdog in statist distributions. Symbolic relations shift course where we see that while "speech and writing [understood to be] the most analysed site of symbolic gender relations, it is not the only one. Gender symbolism also operates in dress, makeup, gesture, in photography and film, and in more

impersonal forms of culture such as the built environment” (Connell 2002: 66).¹⁹ The way in which the women MPs talk about obstacles is not in any way associated with being traditionally feminine. Rather, the obstacles became more about tangible statistics in terms of ratios, less about cultural norms that once expected women to keep boundaries to maintain a gendered pattern in the political field.

They all anticipate that there will be more women in parliament in the near future. MP2 and MP4 talk about the current cabinet as a pristine example of women’s visibility. As MP1 and MP3 explain, current issues in the world extend beyond women’s issues to cover, for example, intersex children. We ought to work towards changes, tangible and ideological. The politics outside of parliament (การเมืองนอกสภา) is moving so much faster than what is happening here, inside the parliament.

This research shows that calibre is the main qualification for women MPs. We can expect changes in terms of policy to gradually benefit the people who are under the Committee’s care. The reconfiguration of gender in the Thai political domain is thus visible in terms of power and symbolic relations. Challenges under neoliberal values become less about patriarchal power and more about material resources within the neoliberal regime, as well as the exercising of one’s enterprising self to aid, assist, and coordinate with people and different parties.

Concluding Remarks

This paper theorises Thai women MPs’ labours—corporeal and emotional—under the Thai neoliberal political establishment. The in-depth interviews with four women MPs from the Committee that oversees various groups of individuals on the periphery show that they share similar goals in prioritising the people’s wellbeing and in making legal protection and policies more potent. Some thrive toward cultivating change in ideologies. In particular, gender justice and systemic inequality cannot be solved by an independent party alone.

While acknowledging that embodying neoliberal selves is vital for their work, their coalition gives precedence to bettering the people’s lives and fostering welfare, which characterises the gender of governance in contemporary Thai politics. A culture of opulence is, to some extent, expected by their constituents and potential voters as it not only projects reliability but also epitomises the locals’ desire to have better status and livelihood. The politics of aspiration and neoliberal feminine self go hand-in-hand in the Thai neoliberal regime, where class disparity and uneven allocation of provisions still exist, but not without MPs’ criticisms.

It is worth noting that in contemporary Thai politics, gender, politics, and neoliberalism intersect in ways that do not substantially alter the unequal social structure. If anything, achieving equality—whether in terms of class, gender, or the body—is a gradual process that continues to move forward, and that progress takes time. Political access may not depend solely on capital and resources, but once political actors enter the system, material resources—both corporeal and monetary—become key impediments for some in carrying out their responsibilities.

As it appears, even when gendered barriers seem to diminish, economic resources, tied to an unequal class structure, remain essential for political actors to perform their roles, appear credible in parliament, and embody the neoliberal feminine self. Although gender norms and conceptions have evolved, political actors—and their constituents—remain bound by the imperatives of neoliberal logic. In some areas, individualism and human capital are valorised, as some MPs have expressed: this is what their electorates expect of them.

¹⁹ MP3 asserts that in the future, there may not be *phet* categories (กลัองเพศ). There may be quota policies, but only for a certain period of time. We can expect that in the future, people who do politics will do so because of their motivation is to change and better the structure of society. She asserts that: “Doing politics is about the people... Politics outside of parliament is rapidly moving. People are very aware on a deeper level... I’m confident that the statistics for women MPs will be much higher in the next three years. And we can anticipate more extraordinary legislative proposals in the future” (Interview with MP3 2024).

Lastly, some MPs are adamant in working toward structural change, trusting in the politics of hope. In foreseeing a greater ratio of women in Thai parliamentary politics, the women MPs gradually perform signs of protest toward the masculine sphere that politicians and traditional media often associate with conventional feminine tropes. Incremental changes can be seen through symbolic relations to class-based bodies, interview statements, speeches given in parliament, and on social media. The once androcentric gender relations in Thai politics are under imminent challenge. In so doing, the women MPs knowingly conform to *kalatesa*, when and where they can, to achieve their political goals. While feminine qualities can still be seen, the women MPs play with and manoeuvre them. Amid the lack of stability that statist institutions provide, the women MPs experience both precarity and agency under the spirit of heightened capitalism. The women MPs represent both customary and new ambitions for the future generation to do politics where big names and prominent families become less relevant.

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