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Women can be expert sources too

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THE NATION

UNESCO Bangkok gives the news media a list of women who can provide them with the knowledge they need

IT'S A disturbing fact that, even as another International Women's Day was being observed this week, women in Thailand most often "make the news" as victims or as sexual objects. At the same time, female voices are seldom heard in the press offering opinions or guidance on current events. This is despite the fact that Thailand has many women experts in a variety of newsworthy fields.

With the help of Unesco, though, we might soon begin hearing them more.

The United Nations agency's Bangkok office has just unveiled the world's first database of female sources for commentary on news events, designed specifically for journalists. It's called "Women Make the News" (WMN).

Research in Thailand has determined that almost 53 per cent of scientists are women and about 37 per cent of business executives. Yet, in terms of women being involved in public affairs, Thailand ranked 131 out of 145 countries surveyed for the 2015 Global Gender Gap Index. And a 2014 Thai PBS study of one month's television news coverage found that only one in four "expert sources" interviewed were women.

As is the case around the world, women in Thailand are both underrepresented and misrepresented in the news media. Female expertise is not as visible as demographics indicate it should be.

"There is a huge gap," says Misako Ito of Unesco, "between the commitments made at the very highest levels to promote gender equality in the media, and the very concrete reality of the work of journalists who have to produce news in a limited time and who don't have access to the relevant resources and contacts.

"We decided to develop a very simple tool to respond to the daily requirements of the work of the journalists by providing a platform they can use to access the women's voices they may struggle to find."

The WMN database in Thai and English – accessed by registration and log-on at www.WMNThailand.org – offers to put journalists in touch with nearly 300 female sources listed to date across the country. Their expertise spans grassroots to policymaking levels in three areas – media, ICT and innovation; environment and climate change; and Southeast Asian cultures and history. These are the areas that journalists complained lacked female voices.

Anne-Charlotte Malm of the Swedish Embassy in Bangkok points out that most people depend on the news media to stay informed, so marginalising women in the news undermines full democratic participation.

"The news media [have] a great responsibility to democratic development, and when these media undervalue women's opinions, thoughts and actions, they risk being a restraining force [on] democratic, sustainable and equitable development," she says.

"Gender equality is not a goal in itself – it is essential for achieving peace, poverty reduction and sustainable development."

Ito, Unesco's regional adviser for communication and information, notes that women heads of state around the world boost contribute much to the gender's positive image.

"If the media can better reflect women as experts or leaders, that transmits a very powerful message to future generations. They might see themselves becoming world leaders too."

The Thailand project, part of Unesco's global Women Make the News initiative, has the support of the Swedish government, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University's Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCDKM) and Akin Asia. Australian Aid is this month sponsoring training for experts. A region-wide database is in the works.

Chanette Tinnam, a lecturer with Mahidol University's Contemplative Education Centre, believes the dearth of women experts in media stories and broadcasts reflects the situation within the media organisations themselves.

Her research found men significantly outnumbering women in positions of authority at news outlets, with women typically seen as burdened by the demands of motherhood and lacking in technological skills.

"The WMN database will bring benefit as long as it has the collaboration of the media, which must change their mindset and realise there are a lot of women experts who can talk about hard news too," says Chanette.

Siriporn Pajharawat of Microsoft Thailand's Evangelism (DX) Group says countless women succeed in IT, but their stories are underplayed in favour of the usual narrative that tech is a "man's arena".

"Stereotyping women as being technologically challenged is a major factor in impeding the growth of women studying STEM," she says, referring to science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

"The media have influence as a role model. If girls and women see that there are female experts in science and technology, they'll have more confidence to pursue those fields."

Supinya Klangnarong – the only female member of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission – says she's sometimes criticised for being frequently cited in the news. But she's more concerned that broadcasters are not obliged to adhere to the commission's code of ethics for the media – which includes "gender sensitivity".

"If women don't make the news, that's partially because of our culture, which expects women to be sweet and humble. Women tend to be shy about speaking out, especially when their opinion is contrary to what the powers-that-be say."

Kamolrat Intararat of CCDKM, who assembled the contact information for the database, believes the project will help give voice to women in different sectors as well as remote, underrepresented communities.