



The software of gender equality

# Thailand's woman of independent means

As the first Asian president of the Federation of Business and Professional Women, Thailand's Chonchanok Viravan is fighting for equal rights in the region.

Winsome Lane reports

**M**uch has been written about the Asian financial crisis of 1997, most of it painful. But in Thailand, where the meltdown has been particularly harsh, the crisis has had an unexpected outcome: the liberation of the country's women in business.

"Prior to the financial crisis, most companies were run by men and women had to retire at 55, while the retirement age for men was 60," says Chonchanok Viravan, elected last year as the youngest and first Asian president of the Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW). "But right after the crisis, there was the phenomenon that a lot more women became executives. The percentage rise is quite significant."

According to her, an official survey in Thailand showed that women in business did not favor reducing expenses during the crisis by cutting staff.

"They tried to do it by cutting out other things and maybe reducing salaries temporarily," she adds. "So the company did not lose its talented and experienced staff and the workers were grateful and worked harder. When the company recovered, it was able to compensate them. The conclusion was that women's better handling of human resources was the reason their companies survived."

Of course, as Viravan herself points out, it didn't hurt that more Western companies came into Asia in the wake of the financial crisis, and they were more likely to put women in executive positions.

Still, she credits this feminine mystic over financial management as one virtue that has allowed Thai women to survive and even thrive after the crisis.



"I believe that women are very careful with money, they are more cautious – men are the risk takers. This is why businesses with women in key positions survived the crisis better," Viravan says.

"In Thai families, it is traditional that the woman handles the finances. The crisis showed the value of women in management, so their position is now much stronger. But there is still work to be done."

For instance, she adds, women in Thailand are generally not paid the same rate as men for the same job. "It is still very tough to convince management that women should have equal pay."

**WOMEN POWER:** A family photograph taken in August 2005 with Chonchanok Viravan, on the right, with her parents, Ueychai and Chuchit, and five sisters – Kanokkaew, Raveephorn, Naphaphen, Benjavan and Phunphilas. Chonchanok is the eldest in a family of academic super-achievers.

Viravan is doing her bit to change this attitude, and she is in a very good position to do just that. Last year, she was hailed as one of the "Women Who Make a Difference" in an official publication of the Gender Development Research Institute of Thailand. The country's Ministry of Social Development has also cited her as one of the "Outstanding Women of Thailand" in 2006.

### ► Role model

“Chonchonak Viravan is a role model for other Asian women,” says Anna Fang, president of the Hong Kong Association of BPW for five years and a member of the BPW International Mentoring Taskforce. “She has helped to revolutionize BPW and to make it more responsive to the needs of women today and bring it into the digital age. She has consistently worked with a passion to promote the rights of women around the world.”

Viravan was actually the vice-president of the United Overseas Bank in Thailand when she was elected to the BPW post last year. She initially thought she could manage both jobs but found it impossible, so she took an indefinite leave of absence from the bank to focus on her BPW tasks.

The post is not salaried, but she gets traveling expenses and a subsistence allowance. “Fortunately, I have independent means and my family is well-to-do so I am able to do this,” she says.

Her parents were the owners of the Viravan Co, a major stevedoring business operating out of the port of Bangkok, where

**ALPHA ALUMNI:** Chonchonak Viravan with her Outstanding Alumni Award from the Computer Science Department of Purdue University in September 2007. The other recipients were Eric Meyer, founder of Netflix and president of Zurock, and Anne Schowe, former vice-president of Sun Microsystems.

**“In many countries, these [migrant working] women face double discrimination, firstly because they are viewed as an inferior race, and secondly, because ... they end up doing menial, dirty or even dangerous jobs. Many of them are over-qualified for these jobs.”**

there is a building named after them.

The eldest of six daughters, she does not view her distinguished career in the banking sector and in public office as being unusual for a Thai woman. “Thai women are generally well educated,” she says.

“When I was growing up, I did not feel that women were at a disadvantage educationally. In fact, we all had a very good education. Out of six girls, three gained doctorates and three master’s degrees. The doctorates were in medicine and law and mine was a PhD in computer science. So I did not feel we were in any way held back because we were girls.”

Her family moved to the US when she was 16 and she attended high school in South Carolina, then the University of South Carolina, followed by Purdue University in Indiana.

While there, Viravan had a hi-tech epiphany of sorts. “I was very keen on arts subjects, so initially I wanted to take an arts

degree, but I was advised that it was not the best qualification for a job,” she says.

“So I was thinking of an alternative career path and I had opened my first bank account and had an ATM card. I used it in an ATM machine and this was the first time I had interacted with a computer and I was very curious to know how it worked. So I decided to study computer science. It worked out well because I was later able to combine my artistic flair with the computer in multi-media work. Computer science is really a basic need these days for many occupations.”

### Returning home

After she gained her doctorate in 1994, Viravan went back to Thailand. “I had been away for a long time and had no network of friends here, so I joined BPW.”

At the time, she says, the group was eager to attract members under 35 years of age through its Young Career Woman program. Most of those who joined then are now at the top of their profession, including Viravan herself.

As she does with all things, Viravan put her heart and mind into her role with the BPW, such that shortly after joining, she was elected Thailand’s representative to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for the Asia-Pacific region (Escap) and regional co-ordinator of Young BPW for Asia Pacific. Again, it was technology that largely helped her surmount the hurdles.

“I was quite young for these appointments, but this is one of the benefits of the internet,” she says. “Not only does it speed up communications, it means you do not have to see people. I was very young and I looked young but most of the people I dealt with did not see me. If you are face to face, people assess you on how you look and how old you are, but through the internet, you can be judged only on your work and your capability.”

“So I did not have the disadvantage of people thinking I was too young for responsibility. It was then I introduced



**COMPUTER WHIZZ:** Chonchonak Viravan with Thailand’s Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Viravan helped develop software to improve the efficiency of the Office of H.R.H. Princess Sirindhorn’s Projects as well as train her staff in computer literacy.

because of the limitations of the law, they end up doing menial, dirty or even dangerous jobs. Many of them are over-qualified for these jobs and their rights are not necessarily as respected as those of the citizens of their host country.”

Viravan says most women who migrate to other countries for jobs often do not know about their rights. She says BPW will try to provide “some sort of education” to explain to these women the realities of their destination countries.

“They will realize things are not as rosy as they suppose. Often, they are very disappointed when they get to the new country. But if they still choose to go, the BPW will help them integrate into the society and enable them to contribute to that country’s economy.”

Another major headache involves undocumented women workers. For Viravan, the obvious solution is to make things more transparent.

“Improving documentation is important,” she says. “If you make it difficult, it does not stop the flow of migrants, it just increases the number of illegal ones. It is much easier to make sure they have the potential to work to their full capability. Legal migrants can also become tax payers.”

As she looks back on her 11 years with BPW, Viravan sees a lot of achievements – but even more work ahead.

“Recently, there’s been a great deal of publicity on the status of women, and especially about violence against women and trafficking. This is all to the good – sunlight is the best disinfectant. As a result, many countries have introduced legislation against various abuses of women. Of course, it is not as fast as we would like, but BPW International is one organization that will continue to fight to improve the status and opportunities of women globally.” “I believe that women are very careful with money, they are more cautious – men are the risk takers. This is why businesses with women in key positions survived the crisis better.” \*

**Value-added views.**  
Go to [www.bpwfoundation.org](http://www.bpwfoundation.org) and learn more about the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation as well as how you can join.

the first schemes to help poor women in under-developed countries.”

As the regional co-ordinator for Asia Pacific of the Young BPW, Viravan launched a global competition for schemes to help poor women in under-developed countries to help themselves.

“It’s not charity, it was giving them knowledge, literacy, opportunity, business and leadership training,” she says.

In recognition of her efforts, she was appointed vice-president of BPW International and chairman of the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women in 2002.

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Viravan has ambitious plans for the remainder of her three-year term as president of the global BPW federation, most notably to deal with what she feels is the mounting global problem of migration, particularly as it affects Asia and Asian women.

“The problem of migration must be tackled on an international level now, since in the years to come there is going to be mass migration because of the changing environment or climate. It will not matter if you live in a developed or an undeveloped country – the environmental hazards will be the same. As a responsible organization, we have to prepare to combat these disasters,” she says.

### Migrant problem

The group is also addressing problems faced by women migrants, she adds. “The problem has escalated this century because of many factors, including lack of employment opportunities in their own countries. Remittances to Asian countries from migrant workers abroad are now competing with foreign investment. But a new set of issues have been raised,” she says.

“In many countries, these women face double discrimination, firstly because they are viewed as an inferior race and secondly,