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Casting a Critical Lens on Thailand's Higher Education System: A Case Study of Women's Experiences as Agricultural Extension Faculty

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Abstract

The agricultural industry and higher education have traditionally been male-dominated spaces in the developing world. However, in recent decades, significant progress in female representation has been achieved in both sectors. Previous research has suggested that women in the Southeast Asian agricultural industry have been more empowered than women in other regions. However, women in Thailand's agricultural postsecondary programs have been understudied. In response, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of women agricultural extension faculty in Thailand's higher education system. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with women, three distinct themes emerged: (1) gendered disparities, (2) barriers to success in academia, (3) perceptions of self and gender in agriculture and higher education. The findings suggested that Thai female faculty in agricultural extension held positive perceptions of their careers despite persistent gender inequalities and traditional cultural norms. Moving forward, we recommend that more in-depth research be conducted to understand better how such perceptions coexist with the deeply entrenched gender inequalities.

Keywords

extension, feminism, higher education, power dynamics, Thailand, women

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Abstract

The agricultural industry and higher education have traditionally been male-dominated spaces in the developing world. However, in recent decades, significant progress in female representation has been achieved in both sectors. Previous research has suggested that women in the Southeast Asian agricultural industry have been more empowered than women in other regions. However, women in Thailand's agricultural postsecondary programs have been understudied. In response, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of women agricultural extension faculty in Thailand's higher education system. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with women, three distinct themes emerged: (1) gendered disparities, (2) barriers to success in academia, (3) perceptions of self and gender in agriculture and higher education. The findings suggested that Thai female faculty in agricultural extension held positive perceptions of their careers despite persistent gender inequalities and traditional cultural norms. Moving forward, we recommend that more in-depth research be conducted to understand how such perceptions coexist with the deeply entrenched gender inequalities.

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Higher educational institutions have been shown to transform individuals and communities across the globe (Eboiyehi et al., 2016; Loots & Walker, 2015). For example, graduates who achieve a postsecondary degree can encourage economic growth, societal restructuring, and community cohesiveness (Lee, 2007). Further, a statically significant and positive relationship has been reported between baccalaureate degree completion and the development of a nation (Eboiyehi et al., 2016). As a result, the governments of developing economies have emphasized expanding access to higher education for their citizens in recent decades (Neubaur, 2019; Sakhiyya & Locke, 2019). This trend has been prevalent across Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand, where higher education has experienced extensive growth (Lee, 2007). This growth coincided with expanded access for the region's disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Morley, 2013).

Loot and Walker (2015) noted that critical progress had been achieved globally over the past two decades regarding access to higher education for underrepresented populations, particularly women. In 2019, women constituted approximately 67% of primary school and 54% of secondary school educators across the globe (World Bank, 2020a). However, despite the increasing number of female educators, data has indicated that women in higher education represented only 43% of faculty (World Bank, 2020b). In Thailand, a higher percentage of females teach in primary and secondary schools, however, in higher education, women remain considerably underrepresented (World Bank 2020a, 2020c). Despite this, previous evidence on this phenomenon has illuminated that the "persistence of deeper-seated inequalities between the genders in all spheres of higher education" remains despite the progress achieved globally (Loots & Walker, 2015, p. 361).

Historically, universities have been acknowledged as *highly gendered institutions* (Bird, 2011; Eboiyehi et al., 2016; Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Marchant & Wallace, 2013; Misra et al., 2012; Vu, 2018). Case in point, although a positive trend has existed regarding female's ability to obtain faculty positions, women remain marginalized in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields in higher education (Christie et al., 2017; Cuthbert et al., 2019; Haeruddin, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020; Pigg et al., 2020; Zaleniene et al., 2016). To complicate this further, previous evidence has demonstrated that higher education institutions' gender distribution among faculty has reflected a pyramid structure, i.e., more males hold leadership positions while women have been regulated to lower-level positions (Carrington & Pratt, 2003; Strachan et al., 2011; Vu, 2018).

This trend appears to extend across developed and developing regions of the world (Agard & Roberts, 2020; Haeruddin, 2016; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Vu, 2018). For example, women have not been viewed positively in leadership roles in academia. In fact, in Southeast Asia, a statistically significant and negative relationship has been reported between higher education administrators' favorability and whether they identified as female (Mason & Smith, 2003; Morley, 2013; Sakhiyya & Locke, 2019). Mason and Smith (2003) noted that this

issue was more prominent in developing countries, such as Thailand, where women in leadership roles have been rare.

On this point, Pimpa (2012) explained that this issue could be attributed to cultural norms and traditions in which women have been viewed as primary caretakers and have been typically responsible for domestic tasks. As a result, “women are given fewer opportunities and underrepresented at work in many Asian countries” (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020, p. 3). By assuming these caretaker and domestic roles, considerable burdens have been placed on women serving in more senior leadership and management roles in higher education (Cuthbert et al., 2019). As an illustration, in Thailand, barriers to women serving in higher-level administration positions in academia include (1) a historically male academic culture, (2) a lack of confidence and disinclination to self-promote, (3) underrepresentation in decision-making bodies, (4) exclusion from the political aspects of academic appointments, and (5) a lack of women in agricultural faculty positions (Luke, 2001a; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011; Neubauer, 2019).

Despite identifying these barriers, research on gendered issues in higher educational institutions in developing nations have primarily focused on the participation rates of female students and their educational attainment (Francis et al., 2014; Phipps & Smith, 2012; Mama, 2006; Morley, 2006; Neale & Özkanli, 2010; Vaccaro, 2011). Consequently, Morley (2013) called for more attention to be placed on women faculty in Southeast Asia’s institutions of higher education, particularly in Thailand. A need emerged to gain a deeper understanding of how women in Thailand navigate their professional responsibilities as agricultural faculty despite pervasive gender inequalities in the country (Cuthbert et al., 2019; Haeruddin, 2016; Luke, 2001a; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020; Murniati, 2012; Neubauer, 2019; Toyibah, 2017; Zselezky et al., 2013).

Philosophical Lens

We examined women agriculture faculty’s experiences in Thailand through the lens of critical constructionism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). When using this lens, researchers position themselves “at the intersection of multiple epistemological and theoretical perspectives such as constructionism, social constructionism, and critical theory” (Richardson & Roberts, 2020, p. 10). Crotty (1998) advanced this approach to help social scientists analyze complex phenomena deeply influenced by power, privilege, and control issues. To situate this study, a discussion of the key components of critical constructionism follows.

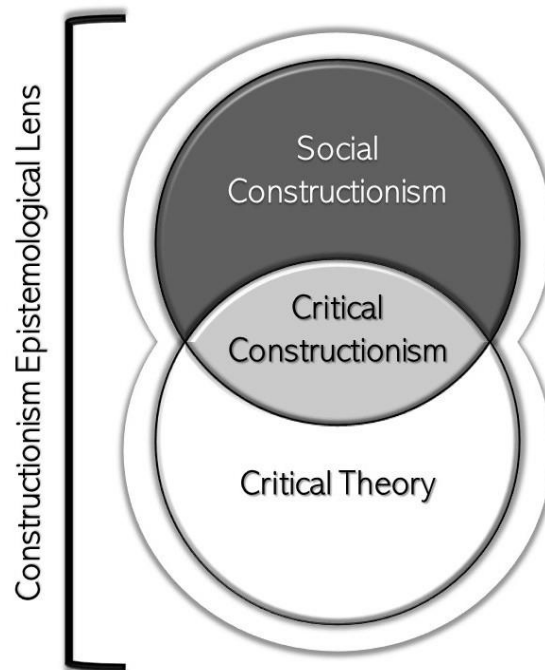
Social constructionism, an epistemological position, is ultimately concerned with how an individual views their reality and make meaning of the world around them (Crotty, 1998). This process involves external inputs and interactions that allow individuals to construct knowledge based on how they experience the social world (Andrews, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2003). In particular, social constructionism allowed us to examine how social interactions and culture

influence the construction of knowledge among the participants, their experiences, and their perceptions of the barriers that might exist in higher education.

Critical constructionism also draws on critical theory to scrutinize the experiences of underrepresented and marginalized groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Critical theory is a theoretical perspective that focuses on critiquing society based on structures of power and privilege that have been upheld over time (Crotty, 1998). Using the combination of these two lenses (see Figure 1), allowed us to examine woman's experiences more critically in higher education. It also illuminated how the participants' social realities have shaped power imbalances that exist in agriculture, extension, and women empowerment (Crotty, 1998).

Figure 1

A Model of Critical Constructionism



Note. Reprinted with permission from *Modern Women and Traditional Stereotypes: An Examination of the Roles Women Assume in Thailand's Agricultural Sector* (p. 11), by M. Richardson and R. Roberts, 2020, *Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education*, 27(4).

Statement of Purpose

This study examined the experiences of women agricultural extension faculty in Thailand's higher education system. Specifically, this study focused on issues related to the barriers and gendered issues women encounter. Thailand's higher education system was a compelling case because of traditional gender stereotypes reported despite the country's position

as a rapidly developing economy and modernized higher education system (Lee, 2007; World Bank, 2021). Two research questions guided this study: (1) What were participants' experiences as women faculty in a historically male-dominated field in a developing country? and (2) What barriers did women agricultural extension faculty experience in Thailand's higher education system?

Methodology

This investigation used an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995), which helps "provide insight into an issue" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 549). For that reason, this approach was appropriate for achieving an in-depth description of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995). In this study, the case was bounded by *place*, i.e., Thailand, and *participants' occupation*, i.e., women agricultural extension faculty. Therefore, every participant in this study identified as female and a Thai national.

Data Sources and Participants

We used purposive sampling to select participants (Patton, 2002). To accomplish this, we identified women extension faculty from Thai universities with a Faculty of Agriculture, i.e., a College of Agriculture. After identifying individuals who met the study's parameters, we recruited them through email. In total, four individuals agreed to participate in a virtual interview. After accepting the invitation, participants were then provided a detailed description of the study and a consent form.

The primary source of data for this investigation was in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted virtually using Zoom video conferencing software. In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), we developed a semi-structured interview protocol, which was approved by the LSU AgCenter IRB. The interview protocol included five major guiding questions that focused on (1) participants' background and experiences, (2) view of women's representation in the field, (3) perceptions of women serving in their position, (4) potential challenges and barriers experienced by the participant, and (5) the future of extension and the role that women will play. To triangulate findings, we also collected photographs and written reflections submitted by the participants. The photographs represented how participants perceived women in agriculture and the ways in which they viewed their role in higher education.

Data Analysis

After collecting data, we analyzed each source using analytic coding procedures advanced by Saldaña (2021). Coding is an approach that provides structure to the analysis process and insight by illuminating the data's underlying patterns. The use of coding helps qualitative researchers construct meaning from the data (Saldaña, 2021). To accomplish this, we

used a two-cycle coding approach. The first cycle of coding involved two open coding techniques: (1) initial coding and (2) values coding (Saldaña, 2021). During this cycle, initial coding helped dismantle the data corpus into discrete and manageable parts (Saldaña, 2021; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial coding has been referred to as *open coding* because of its open-ended approach to data analysis. The approach allowed us to consider provisional codes as the analytic process unfolded.

Following initial coding, we used values coding to identify and understand the participants' values, beliefs, and attitudes on the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2021). It should be mentioned that the data were analyzed using a critical constructionist lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As such, we sought to examine the mechanisms of power and related barriers influencing female extension academic faculty in Thailand's postsecondary agricultural programs.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Stake (1995) discussed how researchers influence findings because their interpretation of underlying trends shapes emergent themes. As such, disclosure of our backgrounds and positionality in the study was essential. To begin, during data collection, the lead researcher was a doctoral student in an agricultural and extension education program with experience traveling and conducting research in Thailand. While in Thailand, she was increasingly exposed to and observed the country's agricultural practices and higher education institutions. Additionally, she researched Thai women's experiences and perceptions of working in the agricultural industry in Thailand. This research was similarly conducted using semi-structured interviews with female agricultural workers in a variety of positions. The lead researcher also found herself uniquely positioned in this study because of her gender. The other three researchers in this investigation were faculty at [State] University and have experience conducting research on marginalized populations, which was important during the analysis of data. For that reason, the intersection of our experiences and positionality shaped how we examined the data and interpreted the findings.

Ensuring Quality in Qualitative Methodology

To ensure the study imbued rigor, we embedded Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four standards of quality into the study design: (1) confirmability, (2) credibility, (3) dependability, and (4) transferability. By weaving these standards into the study, we established trustworthiness of the findings. We achieved confirmability through a combination of (a) the researcher's reflexivity statement and positionality within the study and (b) memo writing during each stage in data analysis and later interpretation. Meanwhile, we upheld credibility through (a) data triangulation, (b) peer debriefing, and (c) prolonged engagement. Although we did not spend extensive time in the field because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we interacted with and spoke to various individuals and developed rapport with the participants during data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The third standard, dependability was embedded in the study by

discussing (a) the researcher's positionality and how their role shaped the research design and procedures and (b) an open discussion about its purpose. Finally, we upheld transferability by including detailed descriptions of the research methods, data collection, analysis procedures, and subsequent findings to uphold the fourth standard of quality.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the perspectives expressed by the participants were based on their experiences. Therefore, the study's findings were not generalizable to all women working in Thailand's higher education. Second, although the interviews were conducted in English, it is likely that a language and cultural barrier existed. Language is nuanced and often includes elements of vernacular, culture, and knowledge of place (Hendrix, 2001). Because English was the participants' second language, it is possible that exact meanings, concepts, or words, could have been lost in translation. To help mitigate this issue, we spoke slowly, explained the questions, and clarified when needed.

Findings

By analyzing the experiences of four Thai women, who served as extension faculty in a postsecondary agricultural program, we gained an in-depth understanding of their experiences and perceptions of their gendered barriers. Our analysis of the data revealed three themes that depict women's perspectives on Thailand's higher education: (1) gendered disparities, (2) barriers to success in academia, (3) perceptions of self and gender in agriculture and higher education. Our interpretation of the data helped contribute to the broader narrative of gendered issues in higher education, especially those in a traditionally male-dominated fields such as agricultural extension. For the confidentiality of participants, their names and potential identifiers were removed. It should also be noted that if a participant submitted a photograph of an individual's face, it was blurred to uphold the privacy of the individuals depicted.

Gendered Disparities

The first theme explored women agricultural extension faculty's experiences with societal gender inequalities. The emergence of this theme was likely because faculty in postsecondary agricultural programs have traditionally been expected to extend their work into local communities through extension programs in Thailand. Despite expressing positive self-perceptions, the women also voiced a number of traditional gender stereotypes. To this point, the participants articulated how males were more often promoted to leadership roles in higher education. Participant #2 stated: "[Thai] people accept more males than females." She further explained: "I think for agricultural extension, there were more males than females in the past,

and now females have a [place] in this career...” Despite this, Participant #1 stated: “people [still] want to talk with males more than females [in higher education].” Participant #3 also discussed how in other areas of disciplines “like agricultural sales or engineering,” there was a greater preference to hire males rather than females. As a result, views that women were not qualified for positions in higher education remained deeply entrenched in society.

On the other hand, Participant #4 articulated how she had observed women become more accepted in roles as agricultural faculty. For example, she observed greater participation in agricultural extension activities led by women in recent years. Further, more female participants were engaging in extension programming sponsored by her university. She explained: “Before, it is always a male come to join a group...but now I can say that a lot of women come [to my extension programs].” Participant #2 echoed a similar sentiment when she discussed her work with women’s groups and female cooperatives and how they “ask her, the expert, to teach them the [farming] techniques.”

Another emergent concept was the female agricultural faculty’s role in influencing women’s empowerment by encouraging greater decision-making power. Participant #1 explained that, traditionally, women in Asian cultures “do all the housework” and that “the males rarely help.” Despite this, she also explained that “[women’s] income is almost equal to males.” She further described how equal income among males and females had equated to more decision-making power:

We can see a lot more of the power...because women can make a lot of decisions...The main income has come from the male [in the past], so any decision is waiting for them, but now women also have their income. So, the power is in their own hands, for us as well in higher education, if we have our own income, any decision we make depends on what we want, not what they want.

The sentiment expressed by Participant #1 was impactful because it demonstrated that she had observed women’s empowerment increase through greater decision-making power in her career. In fact, all participants articulated that women often assumed the role of primary caretaker. However, the participants also described how advancements in technology had made it possible for women to pursue work outside of the home and contribute to household financial responsibilities. Despite their increased responsibilities and decision-making power, the expectation that women assume that primary caretaker role remained.

Barriers to Success in Academia

In the second theme, the women in this study expressed multiple barriers to their success as faculty. For example, because of expectations for women to fulfill feminine and domestic roles, they often received fewer work-related opportunities and experienced underrepresentation in their careers (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020). On this point, participants explained how Thai women were primarily concerned with ensuring they devoted adequate time to their families. Because academic roles were often considered more flexible than other career fields, they

perceived their careers promoted work-life balance. Nevertheless, Participant #2 discussed how placing more “emphasis on family” could also be viewed as a potential barrier to success for women faculty in Thailand because some administrators might view them as not prioritizing their work. Moreover, Participant #3 explained: “...the barrier is that I have to spare some time for taking care [of the family] and my work suffers.” Because the participants’ discussion of challenges in their careers often focused on balancing work and life, the cultural expectation for Thai women to remain the primary caretaker of their families emerged as a barrier.

The participants also explored deeper contours regarding the barriers introduced by other individuals to their careers. For example, Participant #2 described how her friends and family were concerned about her career as an academic because they viewed agriculture as hard, physical labor. When discussing her choice to study agriculture, Participant #4 explained, “my family did not want me to study agriculture because they think it is quite hard work.” In Asia, women have often been viewed as physically weaker, and careers involving hard labor and physically demanding tasks have been viewed as undesirable ([Author Blinded], 2020). When describing this phenomenon, Participant #4 submitted a photograph of women in higher education engaged in physical labor to prepare their field for research trials (see Figure 1). She explained that such depictions perpetuated a negative perception in Thai society and were a barrier for women in higher education. As a result, this societal misperception appeared to cause job stress and served as a substantial career barrier for women in higher education.

Figure 1

Women in Higher Education Preparing Fields for Research Trails



Note. Participant #4 submitted this photograph to depict how women in agriculture were historically perceived as laborers rather than intellectuals.

Participants also articulated how career progression and upward movement was a barrier for women in higher education. For example, all participants noted that women had been excluded from high-level positions. Participant #3 noted that “males get promotion more than females” and “they prefer to select males.” Overall, the participants also reached a consensus that upper-level administration positions were still male-dominated. On this point, Participant #1 reported that there had only been “one female for the head department” at her university. Another participant shared a similar sentiment when she stated, “when it come [sic] to the highest rankings,” the university still prefers the position to be filled by males. However, in “lecturer [positions there] is a lot of females.” “The department head [is] a woman a lot of [time], but for the really high position, like being a dean or president, is still men,” stated participant #3 when describing the gender composition of administrative positions at her university. Participant #1 even reported: “I think if I’m male in this position, maybe I can get promotion easier.” A few of the participants also expressed the belief that the top-level positions remained out of reach.

Perceptions of Self and Gender in Agriculture and Higher Education

Despite the perceived barriers to success experienced by women agriculture faculty, the participants in this investigation reported a distinctly positive perception of self and their abilities. For example, all participants reported that females were as capable as males in higher education. Moreover, Participant #2 stated: “females can do like a man do” and “we can do the same way as a male do.” Participant #1 maintained that “most females in this department...I mean, extension department females can do...can have [same] capability as a male.” The participants also reported that they had observed more women beginning to pursue agriculture as a career. For instance, Participant #3 submitted a photograph to demonstrate how women had become more prevalent in agricultural majors. Figure 2 depicted a classroom of extension students, most of whom were female, engaged in plant propagation. Of the sixteen individuals, only three are male. Despite this, participants noted that women remained less represented in higher-level positions in academia.

Figure 2
Thai University Students Engaged Plant Propagation



Note. Image submitted by Participant #3 to demonstrate how women were becoming more prevalent in agricultural extension.

Beyond that, in multiple ways, the women of this study felt respected in their profession. Most of the women explained they were well regarded as lecturers and research scientists. “I think I get the respect from a student and from staff...we get respect from all,” said Participant #2. In Thailand, agricultural extension faculty were required to fulfill a multidimensional role that has historically included working with local farmers and the community through extension programming. When fulfilling this role, Participant #3 stated that she believed “[farmers] accept the mission of the woman” and that she has had “no problem with working with a group of farmers.” Similarly, Participant #1 submitted a photograph that showed their female extension faculty who had worked with farmers in a rural Thai community (see Figure 3). The majority of the individuals pictured were male. Participant #1’s submission of this photo showed her belief that farmers and other stakeholders respected women.

Figure 3

Depictions of Women Working with Farmers in their Communities



Note. Image submitted by Participant #1 to depict the impact of female agricultural faculty on rural Thai farmers.

Conclusions

This study explored the various ways in which women agricultural extension faculty positioned themselves in higher education by connecting their experiences and observations to prevalent gendered issues. Using a critical constructionist lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) to analyze their experiences in agricultural higher education revealed each individual's complex view of their unique experiences. Further, approaching the interpretation of the findings through a critical lens exposed the power imbalances in their profession. Through this analysis, three themes surfaced: (1) gendered disparities, (2) barriers to success in academia, (3) perceptions of self and gender in agriculture and higher education. The emergence of these concepts offered a multifaceted glimpse into the women's lived experiences in their profession and their storied perspectives.

The first theme provided an in-depth look at gendered disparities in Thailand and how they could impact women faculty. Through our analysis of the data, we concluded that Thailand's agricultural sector remained a male-dominated field. Such a finding provided critical implications for women in higher education. For example, a combination of highly gendered institutions with a male-dominated agricultural industry appeared to provide significant barriers for the women extension faculty in this investigation – a finding that aligned with previous research (Bird, 2011; Eboiyehi et al., 2016; Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Marchant & Wallace,

2013; Misra et al., 2012; Vu, 2018). The study's findings also suggested that women were slowly becoming more accepted in agricultural disciplines in higher education. We triangulated this notion through participant-submitted photographs that depicted an overwhelming number of female students engaged in agricultural extension coursework (see Figure 2). We conclude that although women have achieved more representation in Thailand's higher education, gender inequalities and barriers to women faculty's success have remained.

The second theme illuminated the barriers to success that women agricultural extension faculty in Thailand have experienced. This finding suggested that societal expectations regarding women's role in households presented a barrier to the success of participants in this investigation. For example, the women faculty discussed the importance of family and making career sacrifices to uphold their household responsibilities, consistent with Pimpa's (2012) work that reported how, in many Asian countries, cultural norms and traditions had placed women as primary caretakers of family units. As a result, women have historically had fewer career opportunities (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020). The participants' discussions of family responsibilities suggested that this cultural perception had remained. Another barrier to success was the lack of female representation in upper-level positions in Thailand's higher education system, especially in agriculture. Although previous research had explored this phenomenon in academia more broadly (Luke, 2001a; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011; Neubauer, 2019), this has not been explicitly reported for women in agricultural disciplines. We conclude that significant barriers have existed for women agricultural faculty in Thailand.

The final theme suggested that the participants had positive self-perceptions about their gender. In particular, the women extension faculty expressed that women were as capable as their male counterparts. Additionally, the participants reported they were respected by their students and farmers in rural communities that they engaged with during extension programming. We conclude that although women in Thailand have continued to experience gender inequalities and barriers to career success rooted in cultural perceptions, they have positive perceptions of their experiences in their career and their position within it – a finding not currently reflected in the broader literature.

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Morley (2013) reported that there had been an overall increase in women's presence as students and faculty at higher education institutions across the globe. However, findings from this investigation complicated such a notion. For example, although the participants perceived the number of female students and women obtaining faculty positions in agricultural disciplines had increased, these positive trends did not extend to upper-level academic positions, such as department heads, deans, and university presidents. The increased presence of female students and faculty should be viewed as a positive indicator of change; however, we recommend that future research explore why women have not been allowed to ascend to upper-level

administrative positions. We recommend that Thai university administrators create leadership development programs for women faculty to learn ways to successfully navigate academic culture and obtain administrative positions that could allow them to enact positive change.

We also recommend a deeper examination of Thai women's positive perceptions of self. For example, the participants in this investigation reported they felt respected and viewed positively by students and other stakeholders. Although such a finding indicated progress regarding gendered disparities, this could also lead to potential setbacks for women in the future. For example, Powell (2016) warned of the dangerousness of championing meritocracy in society for women, when individuals are valued for their performance and experience rather than "other considerations such as equality, need, rights, or seniority" (Powell, 2016, p. 29). Previous work has suggested that removing considerations of gender has resulted in unintentional discrimination for women when applying for jobs, promotions, and research funding (Morley & Crossouard, 2015; Powell, 2016). Unintentional discrimination occurs when gender inequality issues have been seemingly erased or deemed irrelevant because the culture of meritocracy, hiring or promoting based on performance, has remained dominant. As a result, if Thai women continue not to recognize the need to advocate for greater gender equality in higher education, it could stymie women's progress in the future.

Another emergent finding involved the role of the family in creating additional challenges for women agricultural extension faculty. Evidence has suggested that women have traditionally been expected to fulfill a substantial familial role; as such, women in the Asia-Pacific region have found it challenging to assume leadership positions (Cuthbert et al., 2019; Neubauer, 2019). We recommend that additional research be conducted to examine how family dynamics might serve as a barrier for women in academia. Perhaps faculty development opportunities could also be used to create a space by which women faculty could talk more openly about this issue and gain ideas about achieving a greater sense of work-life balance that allows them to pursue administrative roles moving forward.

It is also important to note that although women in this study held a positive view of themselves and their positionality in their profession, this does not mean that gender equality has been achieved in Thailand. In fact, if the gender inequalities identified in this investigation continue to be preserved in Thai society, progress on women's rights could be hindered for future generations. Consequently, we recommend that research explore how to open women's eyes to gender-based inequalities in Thailand. For example, perhaps cultural norms and traditions have been so profoundly ingrained regarding females' position in society that women have been unable to recognize how their opportunities and voices have been regulated over time – a notion that warrants greater attention and focus.

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